Year Four

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/4735733.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Categories:	F/M, M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Hannibal Lecter, Molly Graham/Will Graham, (well in this verse it's foster), Beverly Katz & Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Beverly Katz, Hannibal Lecter/Randall Tier
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Molly Graham, Alana Bloom, Beverly Katz, Jimmy Price, Brian Zeller, Mason Verger, Margot Verger, Paul Krendler
Additional Tags:	Slow Burn, Alternate Universe - Hogwarts, Friendship, Friends to Lovers, Pining, Jealousy, Underage Drinking, Hurt/Comfort, Angst, I really am sorry about this year guys, Angst with a Happy Ending, there that's better right?, Fluff, at times very cute fluff
Language:	English
Series:	Part 4 of Alternative Means of Influence
Stats:	Published: 2015-09-05 Completed: 2015-10-10 Words: 36,308 Chapters: 36/36

Year Four

by 9_of_Clubs, Quedarius

Summary

"Being alone comes with... a dull ache. Doesn't it?"
"It can."
—Hannibal, 1.07 "Sorbet"

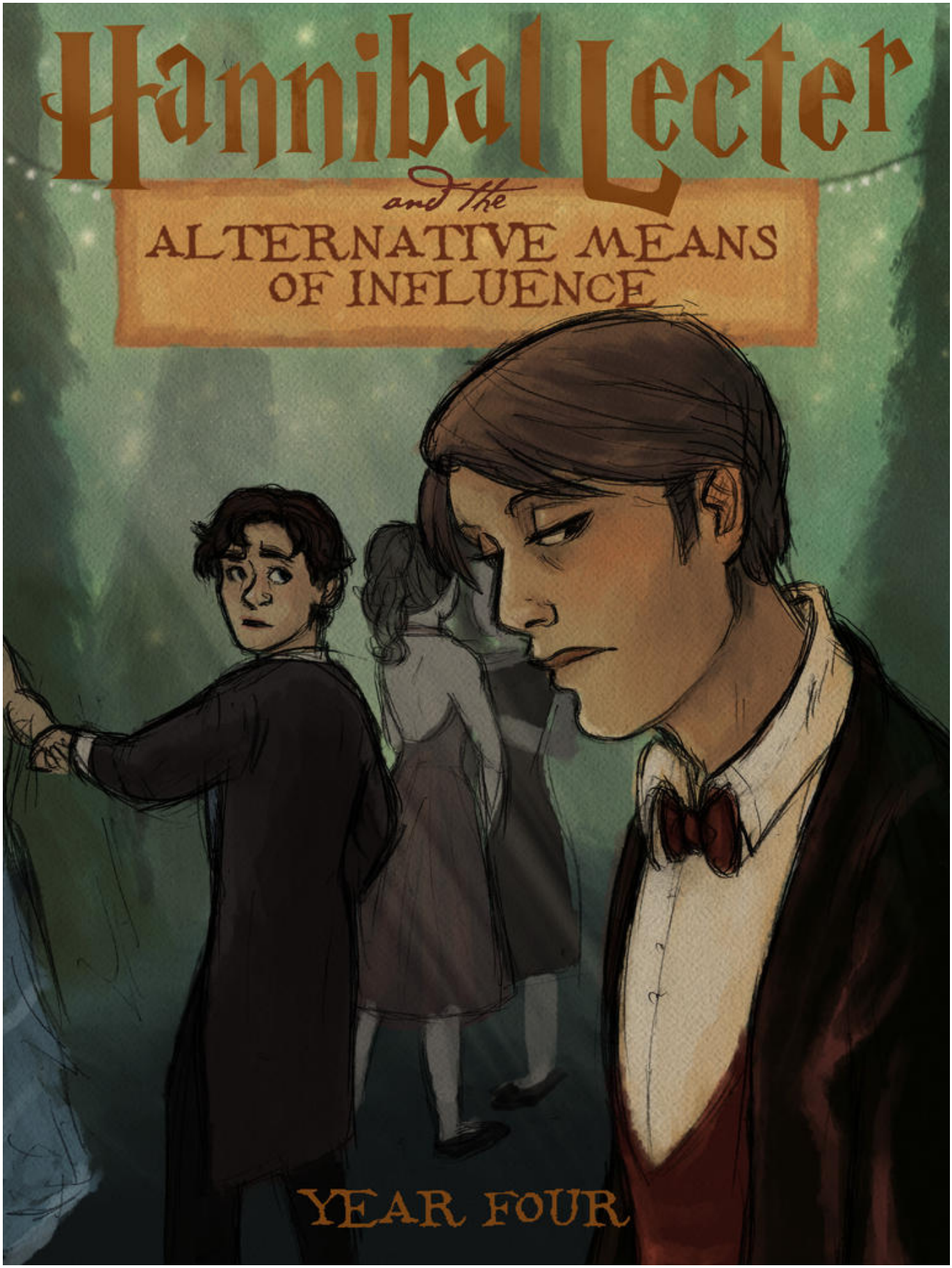
A dance, a party, stumbles and missed steps, the unbearable reality of touch and its lack. A new presence in their lives changes Will and Hannibal's relationship, and they both struggle to define the force that ties them together so inextricably, and what it means for the road ahead.

Hogwarts AU. This is part of a multi-fic series, we update twice a week. Read from the beginning here!

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


Hannibal Lecter
and the
ALTERNATIVE MEANS
OF INFLUENCE
YEAR FOUR

Chapter End Notes

By the way, concept art from this year is here, if you're interested in seeing a sneak peek of what's ahead :)

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal

~~I miss you. I miss you. I miss you. I miss you. Despondently. Desperately. Without fail.~~

Dear Will,

I hope you are well.

A sample of the how the beginning of every letter I write functions. Will believes now that I can speak I should get a telephone, but I do not even know if we are wired for it here, in this wizarding community. He does not have the handheld version of the contraption, no sense in it, with him away at Hogwarts for so long, so I believe there would have to be “phone lines.” (I have looked into this. I did not merely say no.) And I think we are lacking those. I will look into the possibility of construction.

Perhaps on his birthday, which we will regrettably we spending apart, though I am sure his father could provide one more suitable to his expectations than I could, I will find one in the neighboring town and attempt that kind of connection. It makes me strangely anxious, the thought of hearing Will’s voice again, of actual conversation after only letters for so long. What if he does not miss me as I miss him? I do not think I missed him this much last summer, journal, but now it is unbearable. I fill my days as I always have, wake early, perfect my cooking at breakfast, wander into the study, draw or paint, attend the orchestra or the opera or any other comparable event with my aunt, cook more, write, write letters, write letters, write letters, and any combination of the above events. And I do enjoy these moments, I do very much. There is not an item on that list that I do not like. Especially now that I can speak and they all have to suffer my corrections about their lack of knowledge, always draped in a polite smile, and I can ask as many questions as I choose.

Lady Murasaki did find it amusing when I batted words all around Mrs. Maron at the ballet, until she to rightfully admit, she really had not listened to but one of Tchaikovsky's great works.

“You shouldn’t fluster people,” she whispered, but there was laughter on her tongue. Will would have laughed outright.

But that is exactly what I was saying, at every moment, I envision his presence at my side. I had grown so accustomed to him being there, ~~mine and there~~ that to be without is a jarring alteration to my life, and often aches and gnaws without respite for hours, removing the brightness of the sun from the garden and leaving me in my more unpleasant, brooding, shades. What is he doing? Is he enjoying himself? Does he feel my lack resonant in his mind while we are apart, as I do, even without empathy to contend with? I fall into these until the next letter comes and for a time it is enough, they are long, and they sound of him. (He laughs about Mrs. Maron.) But they always fade again. He sounds content, a new house, old, but new to them anyway, fishing, time spent with his father and the outdoors. Happy, even. But then, I endeavor to as well. Though I catch small snags in the lines of both our words, now and again.

My aunt offered to send for him, at the first bout of melancholia, but I think he would refuse. So little time to spend with his father already, too proud to accept the tickets he could not afford. (Travel by magic from a non magic household and transatlantically, becomes just a bit tricker, whilst we are still underage. Easier to maintain the muggle methods for children. I sniff at that, we are not children.)

I told her I did not wish to put him in the situation of asking, and however bitter the words, she looked at me with soft eyes. That same pride that Bev and Will project when I make a...social, conscious?, choice over the ones my own tendencies pull me towards. But her look is twined with a deep relief, a certain exhalation of worry from her shoulders. She does not ask me if I continue to push at my dreams, nor does she comment that I appear to scream less in the night. I think she takes this as her answer for those. I do not disagree. Though in some parts of me the darkness still creeps, whispers in my ear, wonders what lies behind those memories, what I did, what happened—a choking anguish that threatens its surfacing. But I find I do not follow it down. I know without needing to be a seer that such a choice would lose me what I have gained. And in truth, journal, though it is giving up from some perspectives, occasionally my own, I have worked quite hard for what I have achieved. For Will, for friendship and the quiet abation of loneliness, for a repairing and not a smashing of so many seams inside me. I would even miss the whole of the little group we have built, Beverly and Jimmy and Brian. I miss their company now too, in some odd respect, though not in any way as I long for Will.

I dream of the kiss sometimes, but I do not include that in the letters. Perhaps I should explain I still do not quite know, but I would, if he wanted, try it again. I shall try to say when school begins again.

For now, I can only sink back into my missing. Hopefully Winston will return today.

H.L.

Chapter End Notes

P.S. A little reminder, Winston is Will's owl in this fic :) ~Love, Ro

Chapter 3

Will

I keep reminding myself, I'm in the home stretch. I may be sitting at my kitchen table, still in pajamas at 12:30, but in 26 days, I'll be on a train back to school.

Sometimes, I wonder what it would be like to have Hannibal here. It's hard to picture; he doesn't seem to belong with this backdrop of our big, falling apart house, with its creaks and groans and broken porch step that I'm supposed to fix today. Nor can I really see him elbow-deep in the inner workings of the Volkswagen in the garage, a big old hatchback that I've spent most of my time on in the last month. While he does seem fascinated by the mechanics of non-magical things, his interest seems mainly uh… theoretical. I can't help but smile at that, at the thought of grease smeared darkly across his nose, the affronted look it would bring. I think it would be a good look for him, very rugged.

I'm keenly aware, always, that he isn't with me. I'm reminded of what it was like before we found each other, the first year at school, lonely nights watching everyone else make friends like it was the easiest thing in the world. I tried to tell myself then, just like I did in the gray days before my letter came, that it was better to be alone. That I didn't need those things the way they did, I was smart and I was strange, and so I wouldn't be welcome in the spaces they created.

I know now how incredibly arrogant that was, and how untrue. Lucky I found someone with the same pretensions as me, I guess.

I'm smiling again. It seems to be an unavoidable side-effect of thinking about him.

And I miss him, god so much. So although it seems impossible, I try. One of his letters in hand, I let my imagination reach out and fill the spaces that words don't—and he is there in his shirtsleeves (very casual, Hannibal, for you at least) in the sticky summer heat, sitting in one of the deck chairs. His words leave the page and are given breath and voice, that quiet rumble that I'm terrified to forget the sound of. He laughs, and tells me about the opera, weaves a vision of the strange and beautiful world he lives in, separate completely from my life here. I wonder if I'll ever get to see it, know that these people and these things are real and tangible, rather than something from Titania's court. The salt air rustles his bangs from their place, scattering them across his forehead as he takes a drink. The real Hannibal would frown at their disobedience, tuck them back into their proper place, but I find I like them that way—it softens him—so in my mind's eye, they stay.

But it's only a shade of him. It flickers and vanishes with the last curl of his words on the page, and I am alone again.

Maybe if I could get the Volkswagen to start, and actually had a permit to drive it, it wouldn't be so bad. I could get out of the house even while Dad's at work, do something worthwhile so my letters don't have quite so much to do with the odd handiwork around the new house, or the flea market paperback I just finished (almost one a day, it seems). At least he hasn't seemed to get bored yet—the replies keep coming, anyway.

26 days...

Chapter 4

Hannibal

There was laughter behind the compartment door when I first pushed it aside. There is laughter still now. But I am not laughing, journal. I do not believe I am laughing at all.

Should I begin from the beginning then? It is not a very long story, and it would appear I have nothing but time in which to tell it, since evidently, my presence in this compartment might be done without. But I am not in any mood to humor that desire today, despite the raised brows and the sidelong glances every now and again. Not from Will of course, he is happily oblivious, which is rather strange for a person with chronic empathy, or more than likely, he simply wishes to avoid confrontation.

He does not particularly enjoy addressing things, I have noticed.

That was bitter. I do not mean to be bitter. But I was...excited is perhaps too weak a word, I was impatiently marking off days and feeling the tick of minutes slip by, waiting, a mix of anxiousness and pleasure, something indescribable coloring everything, for the moment in which we would see each other again. I could barely eat, let alone sleep, only jittery with the foreign blend of sensation. All summer we had written, and I had missed him tremendously, as you know. And then it was a week, and then three days, and then one night, and then hours.

And then laughter.

Red faced laughter, chuckling his low, lowered, laugh, awkward smile firmly on hand, watching as she animatedly gestured, recounting what I am sure was a *tremendously* witty tale, and reaching out to rest one hand on his shoulder as her own shook.

Touch, I narrowed my eyes. Touch. Will does not so much enjoy being touched, I know, dislikes people shifting into his space as she does now. But he does not need me to say that for him. It would seem she has been marked as allowable. Well, that would be his choice to make.

He is lost in his amusement for long enough, that I do get a chance to study him uninterrupted. He is tan, journal, he looks strong, healthy, I make her disappear with a squint of my eye. Taller too, I would say, the curls shaggier, though atrocious cologne still clings to him like a second skin. It is enough to make my own lips quirk up, forget for a moment that my envisioned reunion will likely not be occurring. And then, then suddenly without my realization, too lost in my staring and cataloging, there are arms around me, squeezing. A sigh, like relief, I am not sure if it was my own, or his, perhaps shared, escaping into the air, and I allow my arms to wrap around him in return. The proximity is overwhelming, and *oh*, I have missed him. Missed him as though he were a lost piece of my being, and perhaps he is that, now. A part of me. *Friendship*, I consider, but it is not exactly right, not the warmth of the hug, not for the way I seek to melt into it and he stands as high as he can on his tip toes so our heads match in height, nor how he half laughs, half gasps, that he’s happy to see me.

Everything the universe managed to tangle is forgiven at that moment, everything is alright, Will is there, I am there, and then—

“Hi, Hannibal.”

Sweet.

Saccharine.

And Will jumps away as though jolted from a dream, hands off of me before I could so much as protest that, personally, *I* did not feel the hug was quite done. If it had been only the two of us, I might have voiced it, as foolish a sentiment as it is aloud, but it was not. No, there would be no hug requests in front of an audience. It was enough that she was there at all.

For a moment, I considered pretending I had gone mute again over the summer. Considered simply staring at her with unhappy eyes until she fidgeted uncomfortably and dropped her gaze. But there was a strange note to her smile, a toss of her yellow hair, dyed—dyed well, but a shade or two all the same—that raised something loud and roaring in my chest. Though I do my best to contain it, even now.

“Molly.” I returned only the word, something of a struggle, the syllables shaping poorly in my tongue, but Will was hovering, and already, he seemed to tasting some of the icy cloud that crept through the sun of the compartment. Well, it was not my doing, my hands, moments ago around him, clenching at my sides. His head turned from me to her, from my blank expression to her overly warm one, and before I could so much as open my mouth. She’d sat down again, gesturing for him.

“It was almost the best part, that poor bowtruckle just wanted to be friends with the dog, and – “

I wonder if it’s an actual enchantment that she’s cast, or if it only has all the plain markings of one. Will leaning in with rapt attention again, laughing before long as she delved right back into her story. As though we were not best friends who had perhaps not seen each other for an entire summer, as though I was not even there at all. Will always humors my sudden crossings into bad temper, but her solution seemed to be to deem them my own affairs and carry on with hers. Fine. That is all just terribly fine.

I suppose I shall have to write around this singe. I am sorry journal, I did not realize mere proximity to my wand would ignite it at this moment.

So what was I to do? I sat down, very carefully feeling nothing at all, and pulled you out to write. Ignoring them very successfully right back, though with a slight hitch when she leaned in to whisper,

“I’m sure he’s just tired.”

(Always a mistake to underestimate my senses. Though now that I think of it, it was perhaps not so quiet at all.)

As though Will needed her to translate my behaviors. It was a slam down of you then, I admit, and had Bev, with her spectacular—*late*, as always—timing, not chosen that moment to rush through the door, chased by some angry fifth years demanding their money back, well. It might have become regrettable. For someone. I would like to think not for me, but I find I am no longer certain at all. A half hour is a rather lot of time to be silent on one’s own, when the one person that has been longed for more than anything is right across the compartment, eagerly carrying on, but with someone else entirely. Perhaps I would be alone on my side of things, as she rather seemed to hope.

We settle, Bev has her brows quirked curiously at the arrangement of the compartment, but doesn't comment. She is friendly enough, but I sense a bit of a guard to her usually unstoppered chatter and blather. Perhaps she too is unsure about a new arrival into the circle. I believe we should be entitled to a vote... nevermind that I was a voteless new arrival, not too long ago. I am me. I am his *best friend*. She joins in the conversation for a time, though it is clear there's a bit of a skew in Molly's attentions, but comes to sit next to me before long.

"Sickening." She elbows me with an eyeroll and a grin as Molly leans in again, sighing loudly about what a terror her last boyfriend turned out to be, a sly wink in her eye.

"*Maybe the next one will be better*." She's nearly on his lap, unafraid, no calculations, open about her intentions, and he's stammering, choking on his words, nearly on his tongue, assuring her that's completely possible. And for one traitorous moment I am jealous of her, of her ability to simply look him up and down and grin, let him know what she wants. Because she knows what she wants, what it feels like to be perfectly normal. I have never once wished for that before. But in this instant, as they carry on without a care in the world, no nightmares or speech impediments, no self-created rules, and overwhelming otherness, the way I am jarringly opposite chokes me. Her golden hair in the sunshine, the red sweater along her curves. And me, ice in the dark.

A fake gagging noise from Bev on my right, only for me to hear. And at this moment, I think I love her.

"You might be okay, Miss Katz." I murmur and it strikes me again, I missed her, a little, too, the irritating consistency of her snark, the constant levity in the twist of her nose.

She rolls her eyes, but her smile is warm. I try not to look beyond it back at Will, try to pretend this is enough to keep the aching at bay. Bev seems to sense it all the same, but she doesn't dare to be sympathetic. "And you turned out to be not so bad yourself." She shifts and Molly is blocked from my vision. "For a crazy, skinny, freak boy."

Well, there are worse things. ~~Like the way she touched his hair just now. I do believe I hate her.~~

What a strange thing, to feel so close and have the longing not quieted in the slightest.

If I'm laughing, it's not very pleasant.

H.L.

Chapter 5

Will

I can't explain it any more than I believe it. I think Molly Foster likes me.

Not in the way that Bev likes me, or Hannibal (well, *tolerates* me might be more accurate in his case, but tolerates me a great deal better than he does anyone else, which I'll take as a compliment) but you know…

like likes me.

I shudder to even write that phrase, but I don't know what else to call it. Nobody has ever been interested in me in… that way (if they have, they're very good at disguising it). Well, not since Jennifer Strickland passed me that note in the second grade, but I don't think this is a check yes/check no kind of situation.

Is it that simple?

There she was on the train today, all flashing smiles and warm, summer skin, and for some reason, making an effort for *me*. I have to admit, I don't know what to do with that. There's a strange, pleasant nervousness that bubbles up when I think about her, even now, drawing the curtains on my bed, the idea of more, of *see you soon* said over her shoulder with a grin, and of touch—oh god, *touch*, her hands constantly finding my shoulder, my knee.

I only wish…

Well, my dad has a few choice sayings about wishing.

It's good to be back though, the wind through the windows is familiar and comforting, the prospect of class tomorrow, of sitting in Charms with a blonde ponytail in front of me, of meals with Bev and Hannibal.

Hannibal who entered the train today in his plainclothes, at least three inches taller than when I last saw him, broader in the shoulders, and—much to my amusement—his hair very casually ruffled down across his forehead. He looked really… well, that is, he looked good. I mean, like he had a good summer. I—I was really, utterly, and completely *relieved* to see him, it almost knocked the breath out of me, and I couldn't help but reach; not with my mind, I'm careful about that, these days, but with my hands, pulling him to me, telling him in probably stupid, careless words, how glad I was to see him. He seemed happy too, for a moment, but then… I don't know, it was like he slammed these walls down. Like he was angry with me. I've been thinking about it all night, turning over the things that were said, but I can't think of him properly without remembering the sign off of his last letter, words that stayed with me in the week before the train,

I think of you often.

I tried not to read into them, but they had lit something electric through me, something that twined red and gleeful through my head when I tried to sleep, and although I know, I kept telling myself not to, I had hoped…

But there I go again.

Chapter 6

Hannibal

There is a girl sitting at my table. All the other tables are empty, but she is sitting at mine, and strangely, I do not mind.

I had thought the library would be deserted when I chose to settle there for the evening, most everyone gone away to that wretched village, and no one under third year very likely to be doing homework on a Friday night, only a month back into school. Yes, there I would be safe, unbothered by the annoying younger set of my house, or by the already punished older one. I could ensconce myself in books and silence, allow the calm of the place to wash over me and determinedly not consider what was occurring mere miles away. The hands held, the smiles exchanged, all of that nonsense. I have no cares for that. I simply...wanted to make sure there was distraction enough...on the... off chance my mind wanders.

Bev had gone too, but not with Will. He'd already left, she told me, her eyes searching, when I found her in the common room, brushing out her long, dark, hair. So many eyes on her, I was suddenly aware, so many of *those* looks. Fools infected with whatever madness is so catching in the air, the dull throb of that anger back in me suddenly. But I had not ever expected Will to be one of them, and now—I think Bev watched the shadows cross my face, her hand pushing my hair off my forehead gently with a shake of her head. At least she was wise enough not to ask again if I wished to go. Unlike some.

So to the library, but only twenty minutes passed before the door opened again, slamming loudly in the silence, earning the librarian's glare and my own. A disruption of my perfect silence, not to be forgiven, but as she walked in, it faded quickly. Not because she was a girl, journal, that is absurd, but the nervous smile beneath red lips, the slightly pleasant slow step of one unsure, the ridiculously tiny frame, and the air of warmth that radiated off her, so unmistakably friendly.

The Hufflepuff Effect, in short. Jimmy has the same way about him. It is very nearly impossible, I have learned, to hold anger against a hufflepuff. Even for me.

But though I was no longer glaring, I was still a bit taken aback when she nodded once and then brought her bag over to my table.

"Hannibal, right?" Her red purse was heavy with thumping books and she sat slowly, mind made up but still prepared to move should I protest. In truth, I was still somewhat too astounded by the forwardness to tell her to go. She had caught me off guard and so I was curious. "We have charms together. You, uh, you wrote that paper on the potential internal and external factors that might affect a successful summoning charm." A hand up to tuck a strand of dark hair behind her ear, half perched on the edge of the chair. "It was fascinating."

She read my paper, I blinked, *and thought it was fascinating*? It wasn't even really assigned, I only wrote it because I had finished the other one ages ago and thought perhaps the professor might benefit from reading papers assigned on actually interesting topics. But the praise was pleasing, warmed inside of me as I leaned back in my chair, which she seemed to take for assent and

slumped back into hers as well. It was, after all, no less than fascinating, but even the Professor didn't really seem to have the patience to think it over.

"Oh?" A quirk of eyebrow and I felt myself slipping into that form of me that I bring out for events with my aunt. Slightly too much charm, a pretend normalcy, pleasant and interested. I was suddenly in the mood to discuss the finer intricacies of my thoughts about summoning charms, but did not think she would wish to speak with the version of me that was seated here moments ago. Jimmy is remarkably corrupt, for a Hufflepuff, and even he sometimes gives me strange looks. "Did you..." I hesitate with a meaningful glance.

"Alana," With a laugh, kindly. "Yes." Her fingers pulled out a thick textbook from her stack and she showed me, muggle. It says *Psychology* in plain lettering on the side. "I hadn't thought to consider how the mind could alter magic before. Doesn't seem it, you know, all the pointing and spellwork. But you're right."

Did you hear that journal, I am right.

"It makes perfect sense that state of mind dictates strength of magic. Magic has to be somewhere." Her head nods thoughtfully as she speaks. "And all that blood talk doesn't really follow, it's just superstitious. But the brain does."

She pulled the book open to show me a passage she'd been considering and before I am truly aware what is happening, we are pondering certain maladies of the brain and their potential impact on magic. Is it like a sense? Could damage to certain areas cause the loss of it? Could it be suddenly unlocked or even taught, if one is very young?

A conversation, and I am even smiling, it is not, spectacular, perhaps, though it is interesting, I find myself feeling fond of the interaction more than wholly friendly. I am not exactly myself in it, but it is not unpleasant. Almost as though some shallow part of me is fit for this, and at least he is enjoying, even if the rest of me is little more than neutral.

At least until she asks, with a little smile, her pattern clad shoulders turning towards me. "So where's your shadow?"

I frown, and she adds, nudging me. "Or maybe you're the shadow. You could be if you wanted, I won't make any assumptions." She makes some kind of meaningless gesture, and suddenly I understand.

Ah. "At Hogsmeade." I do not mutter, I only form the words, the kind of nonchalance that this version of me can muster allows it even to be done with a smile. "Why are you not there yourself?" Before the topic can be pressed.

"Eh—" Her face contorts as she considers. "Seems like something for somebody else most of the time, and," Embarrassed half shrug, "My mom forgot to sign the form, she gets a little frazzled, it's in the mail."

I imagine for a moment a taller, fussier, version of the girl before me, and then frown, puzzled. It must have read on my face because she leans in, biting her lip.

"What?"

“She forgot to sign it for an entire year?” That seemed to me excessive, journal. But it would seem that Alana has a few twists herself.

“Hannibal.” There’s a little bit of defensiveness around her gentle tone, as though she’s going to say what she’s going to say, but she has no care to hear my opinion on it. “I’m a third year.”

“But—“

“Who happens to be incredibly talented at charms, so they say.” She shakes her head. “I’m pretty sure I’m just good at listening and taking directions, but—” A hand at the book. “Maybe it’s my brain.”

“A superior brain in your possession then.” I can’t help but smirk and she rolls her eyes.

We settle companionably back to our books, but as the smile falls off my face, the night darkening outside the windows, candles flickering to life, I can’t help but think that though it is not terrible to have company, it is not nearly enough.

H.L.

Chapter 7

Will

It's been a long time since one of Hannibal's nightmares tugged me from sleep. Once, I didn't know what it was, would just wake with screams in my ears and the itch to wander in my bones. Now, it's a familiar cold, the blankets tangled around my legs, eyes burning, and by now the feeling of panic—of *loss*—is so sharp it freezes me that way for a moment, drawing air from my lungs, leaving me gasping numbly until I can come back to myself. Untangle whatever it is that bonds my sleep-addled mind with his, find the thread amongst the fibers that is me, and follow it back.

Sorting out my feelings, that's what this book is supposed to be for, right?

It happened tonight, that same pattern, alarming in its vividness, almost as if I was dreaming it with him. I lay there, chest heaving, waiting to see what kind of night it would be—would sleep ease itself back into me, coax my tired limbs (went flying with Molly earlier; I'm still sore) into rest, or would the restlessness grow until the walls seemed to be pressing in on me?

Sleep didn't come.

I tugged on a sweater, ignoring the soft snores of my roommates. All was quiet—easy enough to sneak down from the tower, find the passage that led out to the grounds. I'd done this so many times, I knew the turns without light, knew which teachers would be up and where.

Chill as the autumn air was, smelling wonderfully of leaves and woodsmoke, I knew that Hannibal would need the open sky. Wand held aloft, the faint glow of Lumos at its tip, I searched. One very small light in the dark.

He wasn't where I usually found him, wandering cold and confused near the rock ring. I bit my lip. The pull of his panic had faded, although if I reached, I could still feel the foreign aching fill my chest, and now my own anxiety began to hum in my veins. Fear, at the idea that he'd wandered off, still shrouded in nightmares or memories, too lost to really see, that he had gone into the forest, or the lake, and that ***I hadn't been there***.

I was almost ready to go back in, take the detention—or worse—to get a teacher to help me in my search, when a glimmer between trees, a pale blue glow that matched my own caught my eye, flickering just within the outermost boundary of the forest.

"Hannibal," I breathed. The relief was so powerful, my legs nearly gave out. I nixed my light and stumbled closer, sliding down the dew-wet grass towards my beacon.

But it wasn't Hannibal huddled in the glow. Or rather, it wasn't *only* Hannibal. He sat in the clearing beneath the trees, very near where we'd once watched nifflers play, but most of him was blocked from my view by a curtain of dark hair. Voices murmured, low, private, hard to catch beneath the night-chorus of crickets and frogs, the rustle of dry, dead leaves. I stepped closer.

The bulky shape wrapped in a blanket conjured a small, orange fire, and Hannibal put out his wand once they were cast in its warm light.

“I… apologize for waking you.” he said as she sat, so softly I almost didn’t hear him. “I was not in my right mind, and I… I only knew that I did not wish to be alone.”

The girl shrugged, and although she was turned away from me, the curve of her cheek suggested a smile. She spread her fingers before her, towards the fire.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I’ve really got to stop sleeping in that armchair anyways.”

Bev. It felt like someone had hit me. Even if I didn’t know her voice, even if I hadn’t been sure, really, since the second I saw them, I had often seen her passed out in the chaise lounge in our common room, parchment scattered across her lap in place of a blanket. She joked it was because her roommates snored, but I sensed that wasn’t the whole truth of it.

We have our ghosts, all of us.

“Nonetheless,” he said, looking up at her. Kneeling in his silly pajama set, he was almost facing me, where I still watched in darkness. For a moment it seemed like he was meeting *my* eyes across the fire, and I wanted that, I wanted it so badly. His eyes caught the light as he watched her, his cheeks, nose, lips caught in alternating patterns of orange and shadow. It made him strange, made him beautiful, made me long to reach out and touch, follow the light with my fingertips as the shadows kissed the angle of his cheek. A shiver, one that had nothing to do with the cold.

“Thank you.”

It would have been easy to walk into the circle of fireglow, make some kind of joke about mood lighting. I wanted the easy friendship we’ve always shared to settle over me, warm and welcoming in this kind of night, and for a moment I hovered on indecision, body poised to step forward.

But… they hadn’t woken me. He’d come all the way up to our common room, but hadn’t made the extra few steps it would have taken to find me. I was an intruder, again watching from the outside, like a kid with his face pressed up to a window display. And while this had once been my place, these nightmare-drenched moments, something had changed. There was something Hannibal had felt that he couldn’t come to me with, and so I had been locked out.

I took a step back, suddenly feeling how cold the night really was. The wind slipped icy fingers through my sweater, brushed across my neck, and I shivered.

In the circle, Bev didn’t laugh, as she usually might.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked him, voice for once, entirely serious.

I took another step, eyes blurry. I couldn’t listen any more. Embarrassment at my presumption—that I would assume to be wanted here—warred with something else, something bitter and new, something that ached of *wanting*. Jealousy? It raged in me, and my throat was tight as I made my way back to the castle alone.

Chapter 8

Hannibal

It has become almost unbearable to see him, journal. In the quiet moments, in the loud ones, alone, or with others milling about. I simply do not know what is to be done. It comes slow, creeps just beyond my awareness, beneath even the rigid hold I have on my own mind, and then slams suddenly without a moment's warning—either an inferno that explodes, hot fingers through my mind, ripples of ugly emotion and the turn of my stomach, or something softer, but no less unbearable. The most hollow of aches in my chest that steals my breath, makes it hard to draw new air in at all, for fear that if I moved, the entirety of me would collapse to dust.

This is why I did not seek normalcy; it does not agree with me.

In one breath, we are together and everything is as it has always been, his frowning unhappiness at potions, brushing wayward curls from his eyes, mischievous glint in his eye as he looks at the wind rustling through the trees, cheeks faintly red from the brisk chill that seeps through our sweaters. I see the rush of blood there, blossoming, and it lingers in my brain, imprints itself as everything about Will seems to this year. *It is nothing*, I try to tell myself as he yells, “Leaf piles!” laughter falling from his lips, wand already out, blowing the scarlet leaves into place, faint bursts of yellow mixed in, some green that drifted too soon. Nothing. He is nothing. Simply a collection of cells, the blush a mere swelling of a few certain ones, the laugh but a series of invisible waves.

And then he's near me.

So close I forget he is just matter and earth as though someone has dragged a wipe across my mind, so close that he consumes me, the prickle of his terrible scent, beneath it a layer of clean, of simple soap that clings to skin from a room filled with steam dancing, maybe an off-key song faint above the torrent of water, glad for the quiet of the bathroom. His hands are on me. Laughing still.

"You're just gonna let your sweater get ruined like this?"

Smoke curves through the air, edges out the vision, and his hands are on me, and we're falling into the pile of leaves, dreamlike in my mind until they crunch beneath me, into my hair, into my eyes, clinging to the sweater. And Will, Will is pushing me down into them, the touch is the only thing for a stretch of his chuckle, and then I've tossed him off, growling.

"You're a dead man, Graham."

And we're together and it's as it has always been, and he's flushed from exertion now, eyes widening trying to escape, but I grab his ankle and yank. He has muscle, but I have height. He's quicker, kicking out, scrambling away, but I've learned to play dirty, reaching out for the scruff of his sweater and tugging hard.

He falls, looking up from his back, scooping up a pile of them and smashing them directly into my face, through my hair, crushing them into my skin. Hand swiftly backwards as I snap my teeth, threatening. Our eyes meet, the hard edges of battle in both our gazes.

Then in a blink, he's laughing and I'm laughing. The wind cool against our heated faces, the old branches creaking around us, swaying, and that ache comes, the first one.

Mine. I try the thought out. Maybe...

Silence comes as we settle, sit back into the soft mass and watch the clouds blow by, the sky is that grey blue that only comes in fall, the cold sun peeking out around the edges. That first ache comes, whole and consuming, expands my chest, draws down my bones, it is beautiful, I can recognize distantly, hums with fragile music, flutters on wings not yet unfurled.

"Hannibal?"

I turn my head. He's not looking at me, looking out across the grounds, eyes forever, all his new muscular edges thrown into sharp relief. My fingers, restless, seek to draw across them, learn them with touch, the dips and turns, the textures I have so often drawn in pencil, find them real, instead, dimensional. His voice wavers with a sudden nervousness that eats into the gentle hurt, draws it up in jagged points. *Look at me*, I think, but he doesn't.

"I'm gonna—" A pause. A quickened beating of drums as his pulse beats loud. "At Hogsmeade… Molly wanted to know if next time, I would go, you know...*with* her."

The careful cadence of his voice makes me angry, even as the tremulous whisper of longing gives way to the snaking rage, to that hideous heat, first at the nape of my neck, dull red, then down into my stomach, nothing stands in its way. Will can feel it I know, in that instant, limbs pulling into himself, so I trap it, send it down to the pit with everything else and throw the walls up instead. Opt for nothing, even though the traces of it linger like the ash in the air, bitter on my tongue. He has been with her most nights this week.

"Maybe, you could come too?" There's hope there, it almost stops me, almost. I am not a good person, journal. That is clear. Perhaps if I was, I would have humored the wistful plea.

"Molly's got a friend, uh—"

But I'm already on my feet, I turn my face away too, and the distance grows. Well, in ways. I throw the walls up, but in truth, he is already inside of them, far too late for defenses, though I try. Try to breathe into the peace of solitude once again.

"I do not like Hogsmeade." Only a version of the truth. "Or strangers."

I knew he was nodding into his feet without looking, and that distinct sensation of monstrosity grew in me. I could still sit. I could tell him I changed my mind, that I would go, and a girl, sure. Terribly fun. But I did not. Frozen ice and dark flames.

"I have to finish an essay." The words catch and die.

He did not rise, and I left him, sitting in the leaves. If my vision was cloudy, it was because of the wind.

H.L.

Chapter 9

Will

I kissed Molly.

My hand still feels the ghost of hers, warm, where her fingers tangled with mine. Proximity is usually daunting, the press of someone else's consciousness more insistent when touch is involved, but today I did not mind at all.

She was wearing a striped scarf. We walked along the path leading to the school from Hogsmeade, early, so we were mostly alone. I'd decided to leave long before I normally would, telling her I had homework, which was true, and not at all the reason I wanted to go back.

Socializing wears me out; too many avenues of conversation to navigate, too much strain to constantly defend against invading presences. I don't want to know that *this* person likes *that* one, but that one is interested in someone else; frankly I don't really care. And it gets awkward when, all of them thinking so *loudly*, you assume these things are common knowledge—as I've learned the hard way—so better to just stay in my own head, watching the sun on the river. But that distance only comes with effort, an effort that drains me just as surely as shifting through their thoughts might.

Not to say her friends aren't nice; they are. They sought little conversation from me, it was enough to smile when cued to, nod, and feel the press of Molly's leg next to mine under the table. But still, they are hers and not mine, and I *missed*, with a subtle pluck of guilt that I couldn't place, I missed the warm nights last year with Bev and Brian and Jimmy.

And of course, the ever-present ache whenever I thought of something that would make Hannibal smile, and he wasn't there to tell.

But she seems to understand, somehow, so when I told her I was going to head back, terrified that I'd screwed this all up and our little trial courtship was over, too abnormal for a happiness like this, she just smiled and said that she was pretty much done too.

Once it was just the two of us, it was so much more bearable. The path was all but deserted, winding through the pines, and her hand—*her hand*—like an anchor, I felt wholly present in the moment. The sky was still bright with pinks and oranges; it shined prettily in her hair, highlighting stray wisps of it so they glowed white-gold in the dusk.

"So," she said, walking close so that our shoulders brushed, "Will Graham. You're quite the mystery, you know that?"

I glanced at her, squinting against the dying sun, admiring the pink the cold had painted across her nose, her cheeks.

"On the contrary," I said, "I'm an open book."

She pulled her bottom lip in, shaking her head, but there was a smile lingering there.

“Tell me something true then.”

I thought, surprised by the question. Not by her forwardness, that I had come to know, and to like, honestly. Openness makes everything so much easier; she is and feels and thinks exactly what she says, no need to sort through a mire of different potential meanings, no contradictions between her words and her feelings.

“I… once stole a watermelon,” I offered, the first thing I could think of. She laughed, breath pooling in a pale cloud, and looked at me with raised brows,

“Okay, you *have* to tell that story.”

I shook my head over a grin, eyes darting away from her for a moment.

“No, Foster, that’s not how this works. I answered you, now it’s your turn. Quid pro quo.”

She twisted her mouth to the side, eyes crinkled in an utterly pleasing admission.

“Fine.”

“Tell me something you couldn’t live without.”

“My broom.”

My brows shot up at the suddenness of her reply, and she bit her lip again. I watched the color fade beneath teeth, then flush back, brighter.

“Is that stupid? I just—it’s the only time I don’t have to think about anything else. When I’m flying.”

I shook my head,

“No, that... that makes perfect sense, actually.”

She couldn’t know just how much.

We had slowed to an amble, barely making any progress, letting a loud group of fifth years pass us. One of them, with a shock of pale hair and squared, expensive-looking glasses cast us a curious look over his shoulder, but they quickly disappeared, and we were again alone. Pink light had faded, dusk was pooling shadows over everything. Molly didn’t look at me, but laced her fingers more firmly through mine.

“Tell me a lie,” she said at last, suddenly very interested in examining the fringe of her scarf. I stopped where I stood, pulling her to do the same, and she looked at me then, curiosity clear in her pretty, narrowed eyes. A challenge, too. Warmth, so much so that I no longer felt the rapidly cooling wind around us.

“I don’t want to kiss you right now.”

And then—well, it was perfect, and sweet, and only lasted for a moment, when we were startled by another approaching group of students. Someone whistled, and she and I both pulled back, just slightly, laughing. I left my hand in her hair for another moment, our foreheads touching, and her smiling mouth brushed once more across mine before the yells grew louder, and we gave into the

calls, continued our walk back. Her hand stayed in mine, and once we got back to the castle, we were finally, *really* alone to continue our talk about truths and lies.

Chapter 10

Hannibal

A moment observed from behind a stretch of wall. Presented objectively, with no perspective other than that of a viewer's.

Alana sits cross legged on the armchair nearest to the fireplace, we are all in the Hufflepuff common room as silently agreed is the best location to study. Too much rife in Ravenclaw, and neither Alana nor Bev favor the greenish light that fills my own. Bev has said as much to my face, Alana would quietly adjust if she thought I had sincere desires to remain there, but she is much happier here, tucked up in a squashed yellow armchair, the ridiculous heels she insists on wearing kicked off her feet, legs dangling over the side. Bev, meanwhile, sits on the soft carpet, back against the front of the chair, face tilted up to laugh at something being said to her, knees drawn to her chest. The dress that skims over Alana's form fits her perfectly, the pattern slimming, sharply juxtaposed against the hole in Bev's old jeans and her t-shirt. Their dark hair glimmers in the dancing light. Objectively, I said. Objectively they are beautiful.

There is a stretch of silence, and then.

"Does Hannibal date?" The voice is nonchalant, Alana very visibly interested in her book all of a sudden; a riveting line, I suspect, head tilted forward into it, but her eyes are frozen. The beginnings of pink touch her nose, sprinkle across her cheeks.

Bev doesn't reply for a long moment, mulls the question over. I see something sparking strangely behind her gaze as she turns it towards the other, away, so I can no longer see her eyes, but there is emotion there I cannot put my finger on. Something raw that piques my interest, though I cannot give it name. It feels familiar, but the parts are not yet in place. In the end, she pulls her shoulders to her ears.

"Is this your way of telling me to make myself scarce at the dance?" She shoots back finally, in true Bev style. " 'Cause I don't mind." There's no assent or dismissal in her words, no answer one way or the other. She seems considering instead, waiting.

The tinkling sound of Alana's laugh echos. "Bev, no; of course not. This is a mercy mission for all the moping. We don't stand a chance alone." I frown, but the words crack the smile back onto Bev's face. "I'm just curious, I guess. You, me. We're not, you know, lumps of coal..."

"*Lumps of coal*, 'Lana. What—" Bev hoots before she can go on, the blush creeping further along Alana's skin.

Do I date? I wonder detachedly as they giggle. I do not think that is what I would call it.

But Alana is talking again, waving off Bev's chortles. "I just mean—we're, you know, cute. And there are tons of, well, *attractive* people around. But he just, they seem to slide right past him, like he can't even see anyone." She shakes her head, silky strands flying around her. "Sometimes I think he barely sees us if we're not loud enough."

I was on the receiving end of a rather impressive, very snappish, *Hey, I'm still here*, the last time we were studying. Certainly, neither of them have a problem being loud. My arms cross, they are not precisely quiet right now.

"Hannibal..." It's a sigh, but it's fond, I think, that hard won affection I seem to have inspired in Bev coming out, and that is the first pleasing thing I have encountered during this conversation. They truly should not be discussing me behind my back, though I admit, I am curious. Alana leans closer and Bev draws towards her, almost unconsciously. "He lives by his own rules, in his own world, sometimes. Often. And that mostly doesn't include other people. He was kinda doing better with all that; way better than when we first met, but..."

Alana's brow raises, *go on*. I must agree.

"...But he just isn't as immune to normal kid things as he thinks, and he doesn't know what to do with that."

I beg to differ, but Alana only seems confused.

"I'm not sure I understand." It's almost gentle, there's a faraway tone in her voice, and for a moment, I wonder if Bev was not incorrect in her initial assessments. There is something distinctly sympathetic in her tone, something that is laced with warmth and care, but touches too close to how one might react to a wounded animal. I do not need to be coddled.

Bev seems to be on the same track because she raises a brow. "You're in for a world of trouble, girl." Her lips curve. It's not an ugly smile, not like mine, but there's something a little guarded about it, unusual for the girl on the floor. "Hannibal's no saint. He's probably as far off from one as you can imagine. That 'what a sad, little, puppy' voice, that's not going to win him over. I couldn't tell you what would." She sighs. "I know he has a tendency to turn on the charm for you, I think he actually likes you, a real soft spot that I didn't think old Lecter had in him, but he's not like that all the time." I don't think it's the right tact to take, personally, and Alana's answering hum confirms my suspicions.

"But hey, you're a big girl." The bubbly Bev is back in all her shining glory on the draw of a breath, turned on like a switch. I admire her for that ability, my own moods less easily stoppered and pushed away. "If you wanna go for it, go for it. He could could damn well do with some distracting after—"

Too far.

"After?"

"Nope." Bev grins, realizing, I think, that she's treading on territory that's too tenuous. "You wanna know, you can ask him."

And that, I think, is quite enough. I step out of the shadows and their conversation takes an immediate turn to quidditch teams.

What do I think of Scotland's victory over Russia?

What do I think indeed.

I am not, I will be honest, entirely certain.

H.L.

Chapter 11

Will | *Interlude*

Fingertips tracing your palm, in Divination. You hate this class, I know, but I like the feeling of shrinking spaces when our skin meets. Lifeline, heartline, headline, I match them with my own, spread our palms together with a fragile smile and imagine they line up.

Your eyes, flecked and bright where the sun shines through the window, they trap me, and my breath is caught somewhere in my throat, my body too tired to put up its normal defenses, and my fingers slip between yours, seeking. For a moment it is relief; exhausting to always be so far, a sigh and I become whole. Promises in the breaks and chains of our pressed palms, and I'm tempted to let the words fall free, the echoes that already fill the air around us.

You pull your hand away, a flicker of a smile, the fading tones of something never even begun, and there is the rift again. My hand itches where it rests against the warm wood and parchment, and even as I mumble the words that are nothing like the ones I think, I want to reach for yours again, to hold it under the desk.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

*Songs that were instrumental in the writing of this chapter:
Flightless Bird, American Mouth
Here We Go
(In case you want to listen to what they are while reading)

Will

Hannibal caught me practicing today. For the dance, I mean. I've been careful; only in spare moments when my roommates have a class, and Bev knows, but only because she has no regard for personal space. She couldn't look at me with a straight face for days.

But Bev be damned—it's important. Where I was excited, now I mostly feel sick when I think about taking Molly to the dance floor, terrified I'll stumble or worse. I almost wish I didn't have to go, that we could just use the empty castle to our advantage and go flying, study for Potions even, *anything.*

But we are going, I *want* to go, I remind myself, and so I've lugged out my turntable and some of Dad's records, to at least make myself feel less silly about it (as if stepping slowly in a pattern isn't silly in itself, regardless of the music). I know if I came clean to Molly, she'd probably just laugh and tell me it's fine, with that side-tucked smile she does before we kiss, but somehow the thought of admitting my hopelessness to her is more nauseating than the thought of moving in an endless circle in my room.

Just this once, I'd like to have it together. I'd like for it to not be her taking me *despite my flaws*, much as I'm grateful for that. I'd like for there to be something that she wants me *because of*.

So there I was, when Hannibal topped the stairs: waltzing poorly, my arms out in an approximation of where her waist, her hand would be. I didn't hear him come in over the scratchy wail of guitar, and when I turned and saw him, we both froze; I with the empty circle of my arms, and he with a book that now hung loosely, forgotten, from his hands.

For a moment, he looked like he might laugh, and I thought I would die. But then a shadow crossed his face, something too quick for me to catch, and he was blank again. The space between us, thrown into light.

I struggled against the heat filling my cheeks, my neck, *words*, I thought, *I should really summon some up*, but my mouth was dry.

"You're leading with the wrong foot," he remarked, blandly, and crossed to sit at the desk chair.

"...Oh?" I managed.

He nodded, smiled in a way that melted some of the tension in me.

“And… while I know you have an appreciation for the classics,” he couldn’t quite keep the ironic tang from the word, as guitar squealed loudly over his voice, “this is not the correct time signature for a waltz.”

“Oh.”

My hands fell to my sides, unsure, and he regarded me with pursed lips, thinking.

“Here,” he said, flicking his wand lazily, and the needle lifted. The sudden silence was heavy, but then another of the records lifted from the stack, switched places with its cohort.

He cocked his head, eyes up towards the ceiling, and listened as the music began, slower. A soft rhythm in threes. Although he’d likely heard it here before, it was not one I listened to often, and I didn’t ask how he chose it. He smiled after a few bars, a little nod, satisfied,

“This should work. Now with your left foot, this time.”

“What? No, Hannibal—”

The thought of him watching me, sharp-eyed while I continued my clumsy circle had me crossing my arms across my chest. He blinked, surprised, while the strings swelled, soft and crackling,

“Don’t you wish to learn?”

Again, that scrambling, trapped feeling.

“I—yes, but I’m not going to just…”

A sigh. I did need all the help I could get. I raised my arms back to their place, closed my eyes, and tried to forget that I was being critiqued by a fourteen year old epicurean.

One step, then another, unsure still.

“Good,” he said, an amused lilt to the word.”But you are going to crush Molly’s feet if you make your steps that wide.”

I peeked out at him long enough to make a face, and continued my halting shuffle, this time more carefully. I prayed that Bev didn’t decide to burst in just then; she’d have a field day.

“Like this?”

The rustle of fabric stopped me where I stood, and suddenly

Oh.

Hannibal was there, in the wide circle I’d made with my arms. Shirt rolled up at the elbows, he lifted his own, not touching, but hovering just above my shoulder, my outstretched hand, and he raised his brows in silent question.

“It may help to have another person to measure against.”

I didn’t answer, remembering the groggy, sweet smelling Divination room and a dim cupboard filled with laughter. My hand fit itself carefully to his, home, and that crackle was between us, a charge to the air in the inches between our chests, our mouths that made my breath come shaky and thin. My other found his waist, warmth beneath pressed cotton. I swallowed. His eyes were bright, narrowed a little in the amusement that still lingered there.

His hand rested lightly against my shoulder, and we began to move. I wasn’t even really aware of the steps, the music, was putting all my effort into not sighing something stupid and seeing his face change to that baffled, frightened look. The dance itself was enough. He looked down, laughing quietly,

“I am not used to following…”

I snorted, and his eyes flickered back to me, feigning indignance.

“I only meant the dance is much different backwards.”

I laughed, at ease, and we found a pace. Suddenly, dancing didn’t seem so bad. I wasn’t watching my steps, just doing them, and when the song shifted into the next, we didn’t stop, just tried to make the steps fit to the uneven pace, and dissolved into laughter when it utterly, absolutely, did not work.

Chapter 13

Hannibal | *Interlude*

It aches entirely to be so close. To have his arms around me, hand pressed carelessly to my back. So close. So close. But it is the laughter that stings the worst. That he is here and we are together and it is—oh, it is easy. So simple to fall into the familiar steps. To melt together and cease thought entirely. Only for Will, can I do this. For no one else does the mind come to a halt, the walls relax, and it is as natural as breathing, truly, to smile at his clumsy motions, gently prod at his mishaps, allow his glower to slide along my skin. Goosebumps. The quickening of my pulse, his skin is alive beneath his too big shirt, my fingers curled into it. His lips are parted, his eyes narrowing in focus, then closed, dark lashes sweeping atop darker circles. Has he been sleeping poorly? The thought is lodged in my throat, but though we trace the old rhythms, the distance presses.

So close.

A change in the music, I move forward, forgetting I am not the lead of this dance, as he moves towards me and our knees clash spectacularly. Imperfection. It should be distasteful, but it is all allowed with Will. My laughter fills my ears before I am aware, and he is laughing too, suddenly, his head pressed against my chest.

I wonder—

I wonder.

Would it be worth forgoing this? My eyes flutter shut for the space of second, surrendering the unbearable feeling of being whole, of Will fitting against me, the final part, not a part at all, a whole that is necessary for a whole. Allowing the half-formed dream to drift away in exchange for everything else. For the ease and the laughter, the time spent together. Could I forget what this tastes of? Relinquish the unwritten claims that thread us together, that I feel are mine. I had survived—survived, but not lived—before. Could I not... he draws back.

"That one was your fault." A stick out of his tongue.

Could I not simply say her name until it was meaningless in the air between us? Sit with them when he invites me, laugh with Bev as we all walk down the streets of Hogsmeade. I said it just now, and I am still alive, pretending that all is right. And we are happy. I have been miserable, he has been, and just like this I could alter the entirety of the situation with scarcely a word. The weight spreads heavy across my chest as I swat at him. Have him back in whatever pieces it all comes in. Are the pieces not better than this? I could, I know. I have the capacity. Graciously bow out to something farther, but closer than we are now.

But to tear it out of me, smash it into dust and watch it blow away on the wind…

His face is bright before mine.

It is my fault.

I have never been good at acceptance of blame. I have never been good at pain. I think I could try, play at make belief tirelessly, build a new tale than the one that I cling to… but in the end. Perhaps it is better for us—

I let my lips curve up at him, choose another song and ask if he'd care to try again. The mask of ease.

—to simply—

My fingers brush his skin, just barely, at the nape of his neck, and settle. Not mine. The words murmur through me, covered in the ugly sounds of splattering rain.

—cease... At least that pain would be all at once.

Not this endless....

He spins me with a sheepish grin, my eyes are warm on him.

Deterioration.

Chapter 14

Hannibal

They are giggling. I can hear it traveling up the the stairwell and I glare in its direction, fingers still working up the buttons of my shirt, though it hangs loose as I pause to write this.

"Come on Hannibal." Bev snorts and her laughter is big and echoing in the cavernous stretch of spiral steps. Whoever decided that girls should be allowed up to the boys' dorms certainly did not have a mind for peace. "The whole thing is gonna be over if we don't hit the road. Don't make me come up there."

Everyone else is gone, it is true, but that is largely by design, the space satisfyingly empty. My last desire is to "share this experience" with my housemates. Though they have largely left me alone since the Krendler incident, and even more pointedly since the discovery of my voice, I rather like this outfit, and it is far too early to stain, ehm, suspiciously. That cannot be used against me in court, journal, can it? In any case, *I* need space to dress. Preparing for an event is not simply the slipping on of a nicer outfit, it is ritual; careful cleanliness, the rustle of unfolding fabric. Every part to its place. Unachievable with the constant noise of my peers, their cloying hair gels and terrible linen shirts pervading into my space, their inane conversations and lewd grunts cackling through the air. No, that time was better spent behind the curtains of my bed, sitting on my bed, legs crossed and poring over a transfiguration book.

And it means the expansive mirror in the corner is not crowded or foggy, the glass clear as I approach it. I do not want this evening, journal, but I do enjoy the preparations. My robes are fine, the suit to go beneath them never worn outside tailoring, spun colors and softness, settling well across my shoulders, making them broad and me long. I turn to tilt my head in the mirror, allow the pale light to draw hollows into my cheeks. They've become more angular of late, my face thinning. It matches my strangeness I think, makes me striking. The thought is pleasing, even as Alana's stage whisper comes curling into my ear.

"Leave him alone Bev, you know he needs all the help he can get."

More muffled entertainment.

"Yeah well to keep up with us..." Then, as though I cannot hear them already, the inflection raises and points. "Shouldn't have taken such beauties if you can't handle it, Lecter."

The reflection of my eyes darts to look behind me, settles on the flowers I've chosen for each of them—bouquets, neither one the type to fuss with corsages of any kind. There's a small box with a necklace in it as a surprise for Alana, Bev's recommendation, though how she knows Alana's preference in jewelry even I do not know. I believe it is telling that I trust her though, even on such a small thing, even if I cannot yet with my dreams. I rifle past those thoughts, smirk instead at the viciously awful baseball cap to the right of the pile. We'd all gone to Hogsmeade last week, the fair weather inviting even me, a perfectly scheduled Gryffindor quidditch practice, making the whole evening even sweeter. And as we'd walked down the winding streets, all of us, shoulder brushing shoulder, the space lessened for a precious moment, she'd pointed at it, dissolving into giggles. *I wanna wear that to the dance*, and a long portion of time with her tongue stuck out afterwards in

my direction, Will joining in with his own pulled face, and my put upon sigh loud into the night. The distant echoes of it burn in my chest, but I pass these thoughts with even more haste. So many minefields in my mind, it would seem. Well. In any case, the hat. One should be careful how they wag their tongue. They never know when someone might come along and snatch it. It is truly hideous. But she is Bev, and so has a way of being exquisite regardless of how shocking she wishes to be. I would not allow it in my presence otherwise.

I send another withering stare at the stairwell as catcalls come again. Perhaps I am feeling less charitable than I was when I made all of these purchase.

But not truly.

They are both, it does not escape my awareness, largely enacting this entire evening to indulge me. (Bev, at least, has no taste for gowns in the slightest.) Wish, I think, to drag me from my recent state of near-constant gloom. I do look better tonight, it is true, than I have in weeks, since summer perhaps. My hair swept back, the suit bright and clean, ready to form around me. An armor of layers, the protection of immaculateness, my favorite mask. If I smile, journal, though it only stretches to the corners of my lips, minuscule, the old smile, only the smallest sweeps of sadness peek through, the barest of sorrows at what is missing from the picture.

I can imagine him struggling with his tie, is anyone there to help him? Well perhaps she knows, the smile darkens. I should hasten past these thoughts as well, but instead they form and grow. I can envision him laughing as he tries to pin me in place, fake glass bottle held threateningly aloft, finger on the trigger, half combed curls escaping into the usual tangled mass.

Enough, Will, phantom me narrows his voice, but doesn't mean it. Before me, he is unrepentant, his grin so close as he pushes into my space, I do not dart away this time and—

the images melt away and it is only me.

Me and my soon-to-be perfection, but it seems in this breath, as hollow as the glass I stare at. A sudden urge to smash both welling through my veins, but I do not.

Well, it is a big dance. Or something comforting along those lines.

A reach for my shirt, pulling it straight.

I would rather be mussed.

H.L.

Chapter 15

Will

The night went by so quickly, now it just seems like a collection of moments, snapshots. I feel like I borrowed them from someone more sane. Little polaroids of friends and laughter; if they were so in a more literal sense, I could touch the smooth plastic paper and feel what the moment had been. As it is, they are sifting through my mind in a much less tangible state, bright and vivid for now, but likely to fade.

There's Molly, pink-cheeked and lovely, warm in my arms, and her surprised gasp as we whirl onto the floor. Tiny, flameless embers glitter all around us, she presses closer to me, murmurs *More and more surprises, Graham*, and I feel something that is not quite love, not yet, but smacks of potential.

There's Bev, dragging me away by the elbow to whisper-shout over the music *It's spiked*! and giggle behind her hand. I have already had three cups of the punch in question, which probably explains the strange, over-extended feeling in my mind, the pleasant humming of so many people so exhilarated and breathlessly happy at once, the way my feet no longer quite perform the steps right when I try to lead her out to the floor, a jazzy classic, brass wailing and the singer's croon, but it's alright, it's okay, because we're laughing, and she's crashing us into other couples, she's been barefoot for at least an hour.

And then I am alone. Bev has gone to the side of a small girl in red, Brian and Jimmy are bickering over one of the white-draped tables, and even Molly is distracted with a friend, their shoes kicked off and their smiles bright. I am sucking in a breath, trying to cut myself off from them, so I can listen to the hollows of my own mind, and what I find there, when all the other voices are silent, is cold. I am alone, the dance goes on without me, others whirling in color and light, unknowing and uncaring that I am standing there in their midst, and I feel a quiet, suffocating blankness as I realize there's one person I haven't seen tonight.

The music has changed. It's slow, bittersweet even, and I am outside, the cool air welcome on my too-hot skin, where only its echoes reach me. Only the echoes of others, as well, easily ignored white noise, but there is one thin and sharp thread here that thrums its pain around me, and it's familiar, I can't seem to find breath, my feet lead me. There's decoration out here too, fantastical trees and flowers that I suddenly have no taste for. I crave the huge, ancient pines of the real forest farther down, I ache for little moments spent under their quietly gossiping branches, but here, on a bench under these magical imposters, the far-away sound of celebration, is what I've been looking for.

He's draped in burgundy, dark and rich, that I realize matches the shades of the girl Bev had been talking animatedly with when I left. Facing away as he is, I can see that he's combed his hair more strictly than usual, but it suits him, like this. He doesn't look out of place, in fact, in his tailored dress robes, he looks more *right* than I've ever seen him, and in my vaguely blurry mind, I note the breadth of his shoulders beneath the fabric, the trim line of his waist, I wonder when he got so much taller than me. I think I am quiet in approaching, but the punch must have done its work more thoroughly than I thought, because he turns as though he can hear me.

There is a terrible moment of twisting as he sees me, and then without warning, all connection is severed. I am alone in my mind again, and I realize that he's *keeping* me out, wonder how long he's been practicing this. And more, what reason he would have. Some unpleasant trail of thought uncurls, whispers that maybe I've been the one pushing him away all along, that he's kept things from me, but only because I've made it so easy.

He smiles, cool and polite, and I feel like screaming.

"Hello, Will."

I approach, but he does not move to make room on the bench. Despite his polite tone, his body has gone all tense, and I don't need to reach for his mind to see that I'm not wanted here, where there is weakness. It aches hollowly, a more lonely thought somehow than being on my own, to be here but shut out. And then I decide that I don't really care if he wants to wallow alone, and I sit heavily next to him, squeezed close to his side so I don't fall off the edge of the bench.

This earns me a real smile, though it whispers of things broken still, and he sighs, shifts just enough so we're no longer touching. I want to protest the space he puts between us, but he says,

"You drank the punch."

"I did."

He laughs a little, and I'm watching his mouth probably more openly than I should. Fey light glimmers in the dark, making the lines of his face lose some of their softness, and I can imagine what he will look like, in time, the man he will be, and I know, the thought hurting somewhere deep, that I will lose him, eventually. Already, apparently, he's attracted someone else's attention, and I know she will not be the last.

She wasn't the first.

And while I'm happy for him, that he seems to be growing into new spaces, however crookedly, it tastes bitter in my mouth as well, because I am not. Even in Molly's circle, I know they talk about me, they don't understand why she wants me; hell, *I* don't understand that. I will never fit seamlessly in, and that's what I recognized in the sullen, buttoned-up boy who sat with me in detention.

But he's gone, Hannibal's tucked him far away and left me with this beautiful, distant stranger, who will grow farther and farther away from where I can follow. I want to smash something.

"Did your date wear you out so quickly?" he asks, the prickle of amusement evident, but somehow, I feel, put there for my benefit. I shake my head, feel my hair flopping free of the smooth swipe I'd combed it into. A smile, teeth and lips, and only that.

"Nah, Bev got to me."

He hums, looks down at fingers he laces together. Pressed palms that I pretend don't remind me of the empty spaces between my own.

"Where have you been all night?" I ask, only the slightest hint of desperation there. I shouldn't be doing this, I shouldn't be wishing for less space when being so close can only cause me to shatter,

especially not when there's another shade of happiness in my reach, talking inside with a friend who really is just a friend.

I lean against his shoulder, survival instincts telling me to touch. He stills, I lean away again. Our terrible dance.

He swallows, and I watch the bobbing of his throat, but I do not press for contact again. His voice is light when he speaks,

"I feel that my dates may have a better time if I play a background part."

Laughter bubbling free, at the ridiculousness of the thought.

"Hannibal, you are never a background part."

He looks at me, and it is the first clear moment all night, this one crystalline second where he smiles. This moment I memorize, this is the one I choose to save; I can call up the exact curve of his lips, the shades of blue that we are swathed in, the song that is playing inside, echoing into this courtyard. The cool scent of approaching winter in the air, the way his collar falls against his throat. All of it, a perfect snapshot.

And I pretend that I haven't barely seen him all year, that we are just as we used to be, that there's not some ugly wanting yanking through me. I want to ask him to dance, I want to take his hand and go through the steps here, beneath false leaves and twinkling lights. I wouldn't wish normalcy on him, never, but I wish I could borrow it for a moment, just so that he might see me the way I see him, and we could have one night where this silent battle is set aside and we are two teenagers at a dance, nothing more. No futures pulling us different ways, no paths waiting to be followed, just hands clasped tight, bodies swaying together, steps taken in sync. The laughter that filled my dorm just days ago, the easing of weight in my chest when my hand skimmed his waist, but sharpened by atmosphere, made real by the unreal lights and the shifting of shadows. Not just tolerance, but *want*. Nothing but this moment.

The question is on my lips when shouts greet us, the song has reached its end and a new, faster rhythm has started. I hear someone shouting *Graham, Lecter!* Bev, I think, a caught breath when I hear how our names sound pressed together, and then they are there with us, pulling us inside. The moment breaks. I realize how stupid I've been, to think there's no place for me. We are all of us dancing, or in Bev's case, mostly jumping, pressed between friends, Jimmy with his bow tie undone, Brian's arms around his shoulders, the girl in the red dress pressed breathlessly between Bev and I somehow, and the music screaming, everyone is singing, and Molly finds my eyes across the crowd, her hair long fallen free around her face, and she's beautiful, she winks and sticks her tongue out, and I think *this is alright. This is okay*.

I am okay.

Chapter 16

Hannibal

"Hannibal."

Alana finds me when I've escaped the dancing again, the whirl of clattering, confused, music and the sea of people who understand what it should mean. It is not, there is a pull, I admit, the sweat and bodies, the sea of moving limbs, laughter. I view it and I process it, and for moments, I am lost, but at the end, as ever, I am always me, floating somewhere, distant and removed.

Her hair is loose from the fancy twist she'd pulled it into, all on one side, falling across her shoulder. The other one is bared, skin flushed beneath the thin straps of her dress. I look up at her, the quiet smile she draws out surfacing, despite myself.

"I thought you were inside with us, but—"

She pauses. Her scarlet lips make her seem older tonight, a little less adorable and a little more wicked than usual. The gentle scent of lilies floats off her skin, brings to mind open gardens and blue skies. Easy, soft. Not crashing oceans and turbulent storms. She hesitates, but moves towards me when I do not tell her to go, settles on the bench, a little too close. Touching. I look at her, a tilt of my head which she seems to follow with her own, nervous, she's smiling, oh yes, but anxiety ripples through her. Alana never knows how easy it is to call her bluff, but I pretend ignorance.

It would be so simple, it would be correct. She would be happy, I would be—what did Bev say? *distracted.*

"You have a habit of disappearing just when I think I know where you are."

I don't answer, I don't think to myself that no matter where I am, how far, how closed, no matter anything, he— I don't think anything at all. Let her drift closer, her presence overwhelming, let her narrow the boundaries between us. Sit still as I did not *before*. If I were another person, if I were different, I might be what she thinks she's reaching for. What she wants. But I know even as a small hand meets my cheek, fingers curving there, that I am not. I believe, she knows also. Though she is determined. I give her credit for that stubbornness, I do not think even I would attempt to reach me, if I were someone else. I admire her for it. For the willful way she squares her small shoulders.

The touch is delicate, her hands are smooth, silky. Only one other set of fingers has touched my cheeks, but one other comparison, and I long quietly for the callouses.

And then she is kissing me, leaned forward into my space, our lips meeting. And it is... It is lips. Lips that cover mine, my head shifting as she presses into me, holding me as though I might break if she presses too hard. I try, for a concentrated moment, in an effort that is so unlike myself that I do not know what possessed me, I try to kiss her back. It is not difficult to mimic what I have so often seen, play the part. Perhaps that it would be simpler, to want Alana, who wants me. To have someone to turn to, for touch, for company... and in the stricken moments. The unbearable truth that I do need such things, altogether too obvious to continue to deny.

She kisses me. But there is no laughter, no spark of connection. I am as close or far from Alana as I have always been. Glimmered amusement and the normal fondness. No whirl of sweeping emotion, not the shuddering of something soft and sweet, the quiet beginning of a flood, an overwhelming need for more, though I did not know at the moment, that is what it was. The ceasing of everything but us.

She kisses me, but I wish it were somebody else. I wonder why I ran, I wonder why it all seemed so hopelessly terrifying. Why I chose that moment to become a coward. I had never before fancied myself a coward. How would it all be, if I could just have shut myself up and kissed him back, reached over, fearless, like Molly, like Alana, and pressed myself into him. Forgotten that I was Hannibal Lecter, emotionless terror, frozen-hearted recluse. And become someone else, who I already was. The person Will wanted. Not the mysterious, broken, boy Alana thinks she's kissing, no, only, me, snobby, impatient, mercurial, awful and downright exhausting. Completely open, as I have never been. My screams, my fears, the laughter no one else can draw. The ever present pull and the perfect melding that unfurls when we are together. Would we be sitting here? Would Will be holding my cheeks and pressing into my skin, the perfect notes of all his imperfections flying around me. Would that be what I want? Is that what this hole in my core is? The constant darkness. Is that what is miss—

It all sits before me in its component parts, and suddenly, my brain shifts them, a whole that brims with light. Light across the darkness that has settled. The quiet ache surfacing again, consuming. I have no definition for this, no comparison. But it exists. It is there, if I understand it or not. And for the first time, I understand that I need it.

I pull away, and she smiles at me. There is, I think, a strange peace in knowing. An utter calm that strikes me. I think the pain of it will come later. When I see him again, and I know that I know. That he does not, nor will he, ever—

For now, I hold the little glowing truth inside my chest.

"It was a good kiss." She hums, teeth biting into her lips, an unconscious habit. But there's no hurt in her eyes. "Don't keep it locked away for too long, okay?" A giggle as I lean forward and press my lips to her cheek.

"I appreciate that you find me kissable." She doesn't shift away, leans into my chest and I wrap an arm around her shoulders as I smirk a little.

"Very kissable." She snuggles against my shoulder. "And a good friend, Hannibal."

"You're rather kissable yourself." I say instead of addressing her last thought, and she nudges me. "You don't need to be kissing me."

"Oh really?" Bright eyes, tilting her head up against me. "Is the Great Hannibal Lecter being humble? Somebody stop this dance and call the Daily Prophet."

The smirk widens. "I was only thinking of you. You know what they say about laying eyes on God, let alone lips." A smack comes against my chest and I find I am actually smiling again, though my lips are still curled, I add. "Don't tell Bev I was being nice, or she'll expect it too."

Purposeful commentary, and I track the sudden sharp, little, consideration that enters in and out of Alana's gaze, maybe she's not even aware of it. But you do not need my memory to recall who spent the entire evening talking together, kiss or no.

"I have to tell her." She murmurs finally, eyes closing against me. "She's my best friend."

A shake of my head, but I don't dislodge her. "Ah, yes." I say sagely, wise man that I am. "Girl talk."

"Mhmm." She murmurs sleepily. "Nothing gets past you."

Nothing, I laugh to myself, real laughter, but it twines with something decidedly less pleasant, self-deprecating and dull.

Only that I have been in love with my best friend for the better part of two years.

Nothing at all.

I am perfect.

H.L.

Chapter 17

Will

The days have been dragging. Maybe it's the gloomy, slushy weather, or maybe it's the sudden load of coursework that's been heaped on us. I've spent too many nights in the library, actually studying as of late.

Alana Bloom has joined our little circle, and I find her a welcome presence. She's smart, and sweet in a way that none of us are, fierce sometimes but never callously so. Hannibal seems to be particularly fond of her, although he is apparently blind to the moon-eyed looks she casts him. (*Good*, I think, and I know that probably makes me a bad person.)

Some evenings I get to see Molly, and we go to the quidditch pitch and fly in lazy, breathless patterns. I understand her love for the sky, if not for the sport. It really feels like nothing else; wind in my hair, and the swooping, giddy lurch in my stomach when I let go, tempting fate to see how close I can get to the ground before pulling up again. She knows too, I can tell in the way she looks after we've been at the pitch, eyes bright and hair a mess. I think she's the most beautiful then.

Other nights, we go up to my dorm, which my roommates thankfully vacate between the hours of six and eight. Her kisses are sweet and grounding, her hands on my skin raising goosebumps and chasing away thought. The sensation is pleasant, the warmth of touch and being touched in return.

Sometimes though, as her hands find my skin and her eyes grow heavy, drowsy in the dark, it feels unreal. Incomplete, somehow. All space removed from us, but all the touch in the world and I still feel like I'm grasping and just missing something. No purchase, no connection, nothing to hold onto even as I hold her. And I can't say, so I don't, because how could I?

How could I tell her that when we kiss, it feels like an echo?

Today, she was busy with an assignment for Muggle Studies, the same one I knew Hannibal was finishing in the library. Funny how neither of them thought I would be of any help, despite having grown up in the muggle world. After she'd distractedly asked "what?" for the third time as I tried to carry on a conversation, I gave in to the feeling of restlessness in my limbs that I needed to shake. If I had to look at one more rune, or the essay I'd been contemplating all evening, I thought I might throw up.

So I kissed her hair, left the warmth of the Gryffindor common room, and walked through the chill halls to the owlery.

Winston was waiting for me. I think he enjoys the respite from letter carrying during the school year, only notes here and there throughout the castle, but he misses me. Well, he misses the treats, at least. He cocked his head impatiently, snapped at my hands until I offered up the little bag of Eeylops from my pocket. Only then did he let me ruffle the scraggly down at his neck, whisper my thoughts to his knowing, one-eyed stare. Talk of echos, of dances and divination, flying, and the dreams I sometimes have, of the river and what waits there. He's not a particularly good listener, but I said everything on my mind nonetheless, until my words were nonsensical and he'd tired of my company. Or the lack of treats.

I laughed softly when he turned away, shook out his feathers and returned to the roost.

“You too, huh?”

Not ready to go back and face homework just yet, I meandered around the castle, passing people on their way to dinner, to study, to relax. I thought about going to the library. I wanted…

But the thought was gone almost as soon as it entered my mind. He was probably busy, I’d get the same distracted response there as I would if I went back to Molly, but sans the polite attempts at listening.

Also... we haven’t been alone since the dance. I’m not sure if maybe that’s intentional, or if he’s really just been caught up in his studies. A dance in three parts, or four, instead of two. I didn’t have the energy, tonight.

I passed the suit of armor with the missing leg, and patted its helmet, for good luck, and then huffed a sigh, realizing I would have to do the essay eventually.

Voices, as I rounded the corner. One of them familiar, unpleasantly so, and I ducked into a doorway as they passed. I hadn’t run into Krendler outside of class in a while, but I had bad luck with him and empty hallways, and I didn’t have Hannibal with me this time.

“That’s the problem with you Slytherins,” another voice said as they approached. High, nasally, and immediately aggravating, the boy it belonged to was a good head shorter than Krendler, even with his improbable shock of pale hair, but my onetime nemesis clung to his words as though he was Merlin himself. “You’ve got no…”

They were very close now, and I could see him gesturing, as though grasping for the word. Leather gloves covered his hands. Pretentious.

“*Imagination*,” he finished at last. Paul looked ready to argue, his dull features contorting and face reddening, but the third boy—maybe Sneed, I couldn’t tell as he was the farthest from me—shot him a glare, and his mouth closed.

“Right Margot?” the first boy continued.

He seemed to be addressing the last figure, closest to me. She wore a Slytherin tie. Something about his condescending tone grated on me, or maybe I was just reading it beneath the deadpan front she presented.

“Of course,” she answered in a surprisingly husky tone when he patted her cheek. No inflection, where he had an abundance. A complete contrast. “Lucky you have enough for the both of us.”

He laughed, heartily and cruelly, and Sneed joined in, though Krendler looked unsure. Their backs were to me at last, and I peered out cautiously to watch as they left.

“Truer words, Margot.” he said as they rounded the corner back where I’d come from. I shivered, pitying whoever fell into their path.

Chapter 18

Hannibal

I love him.

Perhaps I should say, I am *in* love with him, but I am not sure of the finer distinctions between such things.

I do not believe I have ever felt this curious mixture of sensation, the constant thrum in me that leads me to think of him, to wish for him, more than ever. It is unsafe perhaps, to allow such a thing to continue, but it eludes my efforts to trap it, pin it down and pierce a knife through until it is gone or so shattered it ceases to be recognizable. No, it drifts elsewhere no sooner have I turned to face it, pounds in a different place, and the only thing that pierces is me. A tricky creature, I am finding, love, and all it brings; the furious joy uncontainable, one moment, the desolate strife in the next.

In the nights it screams in me, ravages beneath my skin, and then melts into the hazy satisfaction of daydreams, constructions of futures that won't be, but I can almost believe as images of them ensconce me. Wrap me up in their analgesic fingers only to fade into a burn more powerful than ever.

I do not believe I am handling this well.

Alana and Bev look at me from the corners of their eyes and I know they think I have well and truly gone mad. Uproarious to scowling in the space of a breath, or a thought, as the case may be. The latter asks me in her careless way if I wish to talk. No corners hedged. And Alana attempts to trick me into the same by talking too much herself; another team up. Neither way works. I do not tell them. I do not even know how I would begin to press it into words.

Only once do I acknowledge it at all, when I wake thrashing on the couch, my homework flying everywhere, the laughter of the entire house ending, heads turning to gape until Bev glares them all back to their conversations. I scarcely notice, the twine of screams too loud, my head in my hands; a child's, mine, his.

"I miss him." I murmur into Bev's shoulder when she surrounds me, Alana squeezing close on the other side and I do not push them away.

I think they hear what I mean.

I know, the sounds fill my ear, their warmth around me. *I know*.

We do not speak of it again.

I believe this realization, these behaviors, mean I should not see him at all. Starve the feeling at its source, dissuade it of its delusions before it can grow in me any further. But even the thought, sets my teeth on edge, raises them into a growl. We have been so far already and diminishing that more… But I lose the ability to keep a hold on myself when I am away from him, let alone when I am near him. Throw up the walls in a panic lest he understand before I can stop him. A certain anguish in me as his eyes go dark, hurt, as he turns himself away now, when I lock my mind.

Whatever conversation between us ends abruptly at that, or a mention of their weekend together has largely the same effect.

Good.

Perhaps he will choose for me, in the end. He has all but, has he not? I know how they look at me, she, only when I hurt him, a narrow eye and sharp glare when he has turned back to his work. And I only cooly gazing back, inscrutable, pretending as though I am not hissing the same words to myself that her tense features murmur to me. *Monster*. The rest of her gaggle are only worse. I wonder what they giggle into the air around him when I am gone.

And so, I am at a loss, journal. I have been at such a loss but once and I had to strike it from my mind to keep myself alive and even still, it left its marks.

I fear being as this forever. Missing him, longing for him, empty. I fear what this slow, maddening, loss will wreak. All my hard-won control is leaving me, I feel like I am shredding.

I love him.

But I do not know why people seek for it.

It does, it seems to me, no good at all.

H.L.

Chapter 19

Bev | *Interlude*

Listen, if we're gonna do this, Diary? Book? I know for a fact the nerds call them journals, so fine, *journal*. If we're gonna do this, it's not gonna be all trust and tears, you're getting about a thousand eye gouging spells on you, and if anyone so much as tries to take you off the shelf—Someone—Their precious hands are going to be burnt to a crisp.

Hear that Lecter?

Like I'm telling you I'm keeping a diary. Journal, whatever. The last time I had a diary, good old Larry Schmitt tried to take it from me, third grade, and I ended up being the one stabbed with a pencil. Thought I was gonna get lead poisoning, which I guess is not a concern anymore, but I swore I wouldn't ever have something so dumb as the contents of my brain on paper again.

Anyway, you better really be asleep on that couch, because I'll have to just burn this if you're not. If you're doing that still thing to try and get us to talk about you so can sulk about it later, you better cut it out and let me know, because I'll just stop writing right now and that'll be that.

Who said you could fall asleep on my lap anyway?

And when did I become half mom, half best friend, half undefinable other, that's more than two halves, I know, but that's just where we are, to a smug, ungrateful, hopeless manchild? Alana's smiling at me from the next chair over, hair perfect—always perfect that hair, not so much written with jealousy as with awe—along her shoulders, and her eyes are sly. But it's not like that, not exactly like that. We'd kill each other, and we both know it's more just roosting anyway. Sitting on the eggs to keep them warm until they're ready to hatch so they don't get cold and die.

Christ, I'm even writing in their weird metaphors. Mental note to yell at Will about that next time I see him. As long as he's not with the Gryffs. I swear, haven't found people with a more basic sense of humor than the Gryffs. They didn't even seem to realize some of my deadpans were supposed to be funny. Will laughed though, at least until they gave us those boring confused looks, then he shut up and tried to say something more…uh, inclusive, I guess. Which is about the lamest thing ever. But I wouldn't tell him that, too close to choosing parties, and I'm all neutral. Trying to be anyway. I'd have all my family together, thank you very much, but I'd never push them to it. Get there on their own or they won't.

Which I guess could be said…

Another muffled laugh and wink from Alana, and I stick out my tongue.

As though she has any place to tease. I'm not the one who actually kissed him.

"He was a real gentleman about it."

She'd sighed as we'd stripped out of our dresses, that kind of elation that flushes through you (and also some after effects of punch) after a really good night still widening the smiles across our faces. Made even better by being able to slip back into sweats, or in Alana's case, a silky pajama set with another one of her clashing patterns all across them, and crawl into bed. All around us people were laughing, chattering, a buzz in the room and in our bones, it felt good, it felt happy and alive. Hufflepuff is a good place to spend the night, and close enough to the kitchens to sneak hot chocolate before bed. Perfect on a night like tonight.

"A Gentleman?" I'd snorted, kind of relieved, because...because, I wouldn't want to be like a third wheel, you know? And because of the way Will's face would have gotten cold to her before they'd actually gotten a chance to meet, and because Hannibal is not right for Alana.

"Yeah." Another wistful noise, and I shook my head, stroked a piece of her silky hair and tucked it back. I still don't think she seems him clearly, exactly. The generous let down, the mooning Will eyes, only painting her picture more and more romanticized, but I'm not about to put her right. Sometimes it's better to be blind, to some things. And as long as he's nice to her, it doesn't matter if he's not the Prince Charming she's built up in her head. A girl could get confused, with all those cheekbones and sweeps of hair. But this girl remembers narrowed eyes and petulant jabs of pen, strange happenings with face meltings and questionable anger control, thank you very much, and suspects that's not been entirely grown out of.

I only smiled. "Okay 'Lana. "M sorry it didn't work out."

Her shoulders shrug, an arm wrapping around mine as we shifted the blankets over us. "I'm not. It was a good kiss, but I might as well have been kissing anyone, I don't want that." Her still red lips curl. "Well not anyone but - you know. Anyone in the league of Hannibal Lecter." There's a little mockery there, a little honest. Then.

A pause.

"Have you thought about kissing him?" Her voice is drifting, getting drowsier, "Or Will, or—" We both stop breathing for a second. "Or...or anyone?"

Brow raised, I don't pull away, and don't shy away either. Not exactly. "Yeah." I tell her. "Yeah, of course I have." Devil's grin, helped along by liquid courage. "Thought about kissing lots of people."

The words linger as more laughter sounds from the common room and I arch up to kiss her on the cheek in our cozy cocoon. "And now you know I've thought about kissing you."

Half truths. Learned from the best. We drift off comfortable that night, and only once do I spare a thought for Hannibal. Wonder where he is, what it's like to be alone on a night like this. With winter in the air, and a longing for comfort, for someone to hold you, even if it's just in friendship, for tonight. When the whole world seems to be connecting around you. Wonder what it's like for Hannibal, if he can even think about it like this, or if it seems, in his head, the cold is just supposed to be there, a cold familiar shield.

I guess that's why I let him use me as a pillow, even though he doesn't deign to have to ask. Quiet in sleep, but tense, still tense, always tense these days. Half crazed sometimes, lost in his own head since that night.

We try to anchor him, but I don't know if that's enough.

Maybe I let him stay for me too, so I know that I still have him, that he'll still let me hang on. Even just for another afternoon. There's no way in, not all the way, not for me, but I'll be damned if that'll stop me.

Movement catches my eyes.

"We should braid his hair," Alana mouths from across the room, extra animated; as though knowing the thoughts are going to bad spaces, dangles ribbons from nowhere. Her smile brightens everything, chases away some the shadows that threaten to grow long.

And I, in turn, let the worries go for now, give her my best wink and fall into mischief.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Warning for underage drinking and bad decision making

Will

I was fine, dammit. Maybe not totally, blissfully, wonderfully happy, but when have I ever been? No, maybe not complete, maybe shy of perfect, but I was content. I had learned to live with the ghosts in my head, the yearning, and now I…

I. That's exactly it. *Me*. Not everyone, not guys, not Ravenclaws, not people with glasses, or Virgos. It's me. *I* am what he's not interested in. Tonight has made that *abundantly* clear.

I feel sick.

It's not the wine, although that is still buzzing through my system. Molly and I were invited by one of her friends—the start of winter break, what a better time to celebrate? There was wine, and mead, and probably more butterbeer than we could possibly drink. And of course, the pink concoction that I didn't dare touch. It was a little too loud, too crowded for me, but we found a space of our own, in the corner of the common room. Our last night before she goes home for a few weeks, and at the start of the evening, I had hoped that we could leave early, since I'd seen both my roommates here, the promise of an empty dormitory. But for the moment, it was nice just to sit, and drink, and talk, and touch. It *was*, as I said, nice. Potential in her sly smile, the skim of her hand along my neck.

"You're gonna be good while I'm gone, right?"

Her lips pressed to the rim of a bottle, one of her hands was tangled in my hair, and if felt good, it felt so good. I didn't answer except to grin sluggishly. The wine was sweet and bitter on my tongue and warm in my belly, in my head.

"Are you gonna miss me?" she asked, and slid her arms around my neck, weight warm against me. Someone near us hooted in the crash of other voices, and she bit her lip, that spark filling her gaze.

"Terribly," I murmured, low, and she kissed the sound of it from my lips. I meant it too, mean it still, I miss her even as I'm writing this, wish that I wasn't sitting alone in my bunk.

She kissed me, and I kissed back, opening my mouth to let her tongue press in, heat and pressure. She is patient and clever and draws things from me I never thought I could feel about someone ~~other than~~ and there's an acceptance of all of me when her arms slip around me. Pieces that I am.

You're waiting for the but. The thing is, there *isn't* one. There is no part of Molly I don't adore—not to say that she's without flaws, far from it.

So *why* am I sitting here alone, feeling sorry for myself, bruises lining my back?

That was rhetorical of course. I'm perfectly aware that the bruises were put there by Hannibal. ~~I'm lucky my skin isn't burned and blistered, I guess.~~

That was unkind.

Fuck, I—I'm not feeling very kind right now. I guess I haven't been since I stepped out of the portrait entrance, seeking solitude and air that wasn't cluttered with other people's thoughts, and saw—

Nothing unusual, just a couple, wedged into a space between frames, small, soft noises of pleasure. A back faced me, and there were hands clasped in the shoulders of the sweater. For a moment, the sudden, lurching tug of their connection—sensations of mouths and skimming, searching hands—filled me, the low, hot press of lust as bodies met. A sharp breath, and I pulled myself back into my head, concentration, like Crawford's taught me, and I was alone with my thoughts again. From this vantage, I laughed quietly, shakily, thinking that they'd better be careful not to get caught tipsy and horny by a teacher.

And then…

A gasp, loud in the silence of the hall, hands clutching more tightly, head thrown back suddenly so the torchlight fell across his face and I saw

I saw Hannibal's eyes closed, mouth parted. I saw a boy with neat brown hair pressing teeth to his neck, sucking bruises across the shadow of a scar, and I saw hands, hands on him, touching him in a way that is not allowed, that I have devoted the better part of a year trying to convince myself not to think of in the night, when my dorm-mates are asleep and my hand is clasped over my mouth to keep the sounds of wanting inside.

Hannibal tilted his head, eyes still heavy, and mouthed clumsy lips just behind the boy's ear, and—

...and I can't—I don't have the right words for how it felt, to see him like that with someone else.

I know that it's not my place. That we're supposed to be friends, and I have Molly, and there's a thousand other things between logic and the yanking, tearing pain that pinned me there, took the breath from my chest, but none of them did anything to stop me from feeling it. He—with his sighs and his dark, pleased eyes, that little gasp like a knife as someone else touched him—was painted in sweeping strokes of color while everything around me grew gray.

And despite the evidence right in front of me, I was gripped by terror that something was *wrong*, this was Hannibal after all, Hannibal who'd met my first kiss with a look of abject confusion, surely he wasn't, didn't want—

And then I remembered Bev, telling me and Molly goodnight in a tired voice, saying that she thought I should talk to Hannibal. I remembered nodding, yes—of course I should talk to him, I would—and her saying, *really, Will. Talk to him. He's out of control*. And though there was something unusually grave in her tone, I'd laughed, after she was gone, at the thought of Hannibal being anything but in control.

But now, faced with the prospect of—and those hands, which had no right, should not be so readily and greedily touching him, I built a picture that suited me. Of Hannibal, drinking and not realizing what it was doing, and my panic grew that he didn't want—that something very ugly was happening before me.

Nevermind that, seconds ago, I had unknowingly felt around the well-worn edges of his mind, and found it empty but for dull, animal pleasure.

"Hey," I heard it before realizing I'd said it, and I was moving too, had grabbed a fist full of wool, yanking hard, heedless of the stumbling yelp. Cold now that I had a target, cold anger frosted over something else I would rather not acknowledge, something ugly and possessive and terribly, selfishly hurt.

The boy—and I recognized him now, he's in my house—protested. His mind strange and bestial, incomprehensible even to me, I raged at the idea that there was anything special about him that would have Hannibal's eyes falling closed like that. I ignored him, disgusted, and turned my focus to Hannibal.

His shirt was untucked, the white tails of it hanging out limply from beneath a sweater that was horribly, uncharacteristically rumpled, suggesting undone buttons. His eyes were unfocused and confused.

"Are you okay?" I asked, my voice shaking with the anger that crackled through to my fingertips. Not at him, but *for* him, while his senses were too dulled to feel it himself.

He blinked slowly, trying to register,

"What?"

The 't' mostly disappeared as his mouth struggled to obey.

I don't want to think about his mouth right now.

"Come on," I said, voice soft, quiet. I reached for him, chastely—because that is how Hannibal allows touch, with affection but not desire, never need—sliding one arm around him to pull his normally graceful weight away from the wall where he leaned.

"Will," he sighed my name, head lolling against my shoulder. It was easy to read too much into that sound, and I closed my eyes a moment, relishing it despite myself, wondering if he was trying to ruin me.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

An interfering presence, this bland, unspecial boy. I wanted to tear him apart with my hands; no magic necessary.

"He's drunk," I said, voice low in warning, eyes narrowed at the good-looking, ruffled obstacle. "I'm taking him back to his dorm."

"M'not," Hannibal interjected, unhelpfully. He swung a hand up, pressed a finger across his lips, as if shushing someone, and laughed to himself, "I'm— I am not drunk."

“You see? He’s fine.” the boy said. His voice was slurred too, his hands clenched, and I eyed the wand sticking out of his back pocket, “back off.”

I edged past him roughly, heedless of how our shoulders slammed.

At this, Hannibal twisted out of my grasp, alert.

“*No*,” he said firmly, though he still leaned slightly to the left. I reached for him again, but only brushed fabric; he swatted me away.

“Come on, Hannibal,” I sighed, impatience surging up through the churning mess of other things threatening to swallow me. I wondered if he’d even remember this in the morning, what we would say to each other. If we would say anything, or if this is one more thing to be catalogued in the ever-growing list of *never happened*.

“No, Will, I’m staying,” he huffed. His eyes were drawn tight, and he’d pulled himself to stand straight, capitalizing on the inches of height he has on me.

I’m not lying when I say that I had every intention of bodily carrying his half-conscious ass all the way down to the Slytherin dormitory when I lunged for him again.

But he had other plans. Seconds slowing to a crawl, I reached, and he did not reach back, or draw back. My arms reached for him, and I felt some echo of the power he keeps tucked away, the same crackle of sharp, raw magic that he used, voiceless, against Krendler in that dark hall.

My fingers brushed his skin.

It ran through me like a shock; venom in my veins, *pain*, a coiling gasp of a moment where I couldn’t draw breath, and then it left my lungs in a cry as it pushed; *he* pushed, the magic striking as he lashed out with his arm, connected hard. He’s stronger than me, it’s easy to forget, since he’s never used it against me, even at play, and the cold ripple of magic was familiar and terrible at once, a starless sky that burned my lungs with ice when I tried to draw breath, tearing through my chest and filling me with inky darkness. Drowning, burning, suffocating, I slammed into the wall, caught somewhere in between.

“No!” he growled, and I could only watch, momentarily stunned by the crack of head, of spine and elbows, by the sudden ability to draw panicked, gasping breath again. And more so, by the anger, and that *he’d turned it on me.* “You don’t get to tell me who to be with. We are not—you can kiss who you want, and so can I.”

His paramour had slipped away quickly during this exchange, either afraid that Hannibal’s shouts would rouse a teacher, or sensing his presence was no longer welcome. It was just Hannibal, watching me with wild eyes, his chest heaving, and me, watching him from the wall, my heart thumping painfully against my ribs, my back and elbows throbbing where they’d smacked the cold stone, and none of it even registering on the same violent scale as what his words drove through me. *Did he know*?

My eyes stung as I stared; just a reaction, and I bit my lip, didn’t cry. The ache is too old and deep and familiar. A scar marked over and over again; this time with a new edge, because I can’t even tell myself the welcome lie that it’s just not like that for him, I’m left with only it’s just not like that *with me*. I thought maybe, at the dance, in that moment of clarity—and… and it shouldn’t matter, it shouldn’t be so important to me, that distinction, but I really thought that we had something…

something separate, something less close than I wanted, than what I'd offered, once, but something still closer than either of us could have with anyone else. A connection. An *understanding*. And although it was shades less than the churning that I felt, I could have learned to live that way, with the hush of our laughter and the soft ache of longing when our fingers brushed. If that's what he wanted. But I—

A scar, as I said. And I am used to the dragging of the blade by now.

"Fine," I said shakily, and stood. And it repeated through my head again and again, a chant, anger is so much easier to contain, so that's what I showed him, repeated it to myself as he swept sloppily back behind the portrait, *fine fine fine fine*, repeated it when Molly pressed worried, featherlight fingers to my face, across my hair moments later. I think it now, as I lay in bed, swimming in the lingering traces of alcohol, wishing this terrible hollowness would just take me, blank out the sight of hands rucking up a once-neat shirt.

And as angry as I am, worry is sinking claws into me, fear. Guilt, when I think of Molly, and more guilt, as my mind conjures up all kinds of images of what Hannibal is doing right now.

Chapter 21

Hannibal

I dun hthink I can writer ver neatly, journla. Mayebe I drank a little too much, that could be, a little bit, not soooooo much, but a little, because everything is spinning, and I don't reall remebetr everything, so clear. But maybe not tha muchu too much, because that's what they wanted. They said, it would be funnn, Hannibal. Cause I'k not really much fun, no oune thinks I am, but would the party, the party would be and I could have fun. There.

I didn really think I would have any, but goblin wine is deliciousssss, and that punch, I think it was more than wine in that, but they were righh, it made everything all nice and blurry. So many sharp edges, journal, they cut, drag into me and I'mma sick of them, but the wine madfe it all soft. I wasn't so unhappy, I forgt why I should be and I still cannot really remember. Except that thing, that happened, but I juss had more of the punch, whn backc in and had more, and it didn't matter who was wrapped up together in the corner, because I was floating, very, very, very, far. Far away from nice comforble shoulers and an arm wrapped around me, *tortuous*. Palliative - see not so much, I know my wordses, and the Gryufinndor common room was so beautiful, the scarlet was bright, and the gold shimmersd, I asked iif the other people could hear the music. And they all said they could, but they really ony heard the noise, I think, ugly noise. No, the music was beautiful, streaming through my head, and nothing seemed so important.

I probably would have liked it better if I had my Will, but he doesn’t wan me. Doesn’t, does not, wan’t me cause he kisses her and she laughs and smles, and doesn’t hurt him. I ony hurt him, but he shouldn’t, he shouldn’t pretend—things. Shouldn’t come and remind me that he knows who I am, curve around me, act like - like - like I’m his. “m not his and he’s not mine, nothing, all of it. Nothing. A lot, a lot, of nothing. More shatters. I have a big big collection of those. One more prety picture ruined to look at., Why’d I think I could love him? I dunno what ever made me think that, no evidence for tha. But those are the bad thoughts, and they make everythning hurt again, an I have no more wine, now. So I can't thnk them. You udnerstaan, hournal. If I started to hthink, then, then, then I would remember, and I just want him ot know I love him, but I can't kiss him. Ican’t touch him. And he’s angry. I hurt him. Hurt, hurt, hurt.

I never want to think about any of this, but wehn I am not like I am now, it is all I can hthink of and miss him, an it’s unberable, unberable, unbearable, but not right now.

I didn't kiss him.

So instead I kissed - I think it was, I well, I think I don't know. Maybe it was more than one, maybe I jkissed a lot of people. I think Bev tried ‘t get me to stop, but she brought me to the party. For fun. I told her, and I think maybe I tried to kiss her too, and she slapped me. I'm looking at the mirror, it's all swaying, an theere' a mark on my cheek. And lotso f other things too, sucked, and bitten. I'm noto sure I liked it, I didn't not like it, it was like the music, sensation, sensation, sensation. Teeth meeting skin here and there, lips, tongue, novel. Some of it was just regjstering of cells, some of it was nicer than that, but I can't remember who I kissed. I do not really care, I think. The wine mafe it all nice and blurry, but it also made all my senses get even louder, and the kisses did that too, bodies, and it was nice, mabye to be wanted. Nice to be touched. I am not supposed to want that, I am supposed to not care about theings like that, but it was, inetersitng to catalogue how my body

would respond, what I could do with it. Probably I already forgot, but when I was there. It was intersting. I don't want to lie to you. I kissed more after he saw me, much more, because I can, if I want, and it hurt even with the wineee, and also more wine, I had, unil I couldn’t think anything. Hands and alcohol will makea lot of things go away, I learned. I kisssed an bit back and let them touch me, two at once, skin, contact, anything, float farther, go away. Forget. And I did, but now I can remmeber again, now it is quiet, and my shirt is rumpled and it’s dirty and my hair is a mess, and I hate that, hate me, but that’s how it is.

Are you disappointed?

I am not. Will can kiss who he wants. Me, her. Not just me, he kissde, her too, kisses. So why shouldn't I? I can too. I can. If I want.

It's fun, is it not? And that's me, I onely like fun.

I think I am going to sleep now, I am still dressed. But everything is heavy. Dun wnna be awake for the sharp to come back, better to just be furious at mysefl in the morning. .

Goodnight, I love you. Ther’s noone else to lvoe.

H.L.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will

Everyone left this morning for holidays. I'm not ashamed to admit that after seeing them off, I planned on spending the entire break in my room. Molly was really concerned after—after last night, she even invited me to come with her, her hand soft against my cheek. She was pretty, despite the crease in her brow. Her hair was pulled up in a sleep-mussed bun, her suitcase at her feet. Her hands are long and willowy, and I took them, first the one against my face, then the other, unbearably grateful for her.

Undeserving of her.

But no, of course I told her, I couldn't go with her. I couldn't be with her family, all strangers, pretend to be happy, to feel at ease in their life while they shared concerned whispers about their daughter/sister/granddaughter's taste in boys. I just wanted to check on Hannibal, ask if he was hungover, assure myself that he'd gotten back to his own bed, and in one piece, but in lieu of that, since my invitation into his life was pretty explicitly revoked last night, I just wanted to crawl under my own blankets.

And although I'd been furious the night before; ashamed and hurt and betrayed, angry beyond belief, guilt was already hammering heavy in my veins, a slow, sick trickle that cooled everything else, drowned them in self-loathing. Guilt for stepping in where I wasn't wanted, guilt for not stepping in sooner, for leaving him like that, and guilt for all of these things churning through me, uncontrollable, even while Molly ran fingers through my hair, watched me with frowning, worried eyes. Unbearable, all of it, and all of it my own. I couldn't hide from it with occlumency, the scene replaying in my head again and again.

No. She left, a last kiss, and I watched her as she fell into step with the other students. I watched, hands in pockets until she disappeared.

I saw Hannibal then, to my surprise. He was leaving the castle as well, and that ached hollowly in itself. He'd never accepted his aunt's invitation home in previous years, but there he was, eyes on the floor, bag in hand. His clothes were neat, totally at odds with the version of him I'd encountered last night, but there were shadows under his eyes that matched the spreading color peeking out from under his collar.

He didn't see me, and I didn't call out to him.

My room was maddeningly quiet, so I put a record on, not caring which one, just that it was loud and bluesy and made it hard to think. And not the one I'd danced to, just a few weeks ago.

And I was homesick. What I wouldn't give to be in Memaw's kitchen, the comforting smells of her cooking surrounding me, the warm, dry touch of her hand at my cheek as she told me how thin I was looking. I wanted to pour my story out to her, have her mull it over while she stirred something on the stove, tell me what I should do. I wanted to see my dad, hug him, leather and smoke, and an

exclamation that I'd be as tall as him soon, a sentiment he expressed every year. I wanted to take his strength and make it my own.

Or christ, what I wouldn't do to lift the ridiculous ban on technology and be able to just call them, to hear their voices.

The game of Risk from last Christmas was tucked in the trunk at the foot of my bed. I pulled it out, sat in the window seat, and reached, as I never do outside of the classroom. My hands smoothed over the cardboard, and I closed my eyes, felt the pendulum swing.

And it was December twenty fourth, the snow was spilling down outside the window, the sky dark. I was in the same spot, looking across the pushed together desks at Hannibal, only a year younger, but so much softer. There was warmth in his smile, genuine, and challenge, too, and I had almost forgotten the pad of paper by his elbow, once the bridge across our gaps. He was waiting for me to make a move. I wondered what would happen if I altered the memory, if I just said the words that I should have before, that were maybe already true, even then.

Would he turn away? Might he have scribbled something back, in the slow, cautious way he had?

I didn't dare try, afraid of marring the memory. It was perfect as it was, I decided. The flicker of candles, low and dim, and quiet turns, the rules of this conquest clearly outlined. If we could have stayed like we were that night, simple, just happy not to be alone, I could have lived with that.

"No,"

The sound jarred me from the memory, too sudden, and the box slid from my lap, pieces scattering. It was not a lost Christmas Eve, it was the first day of winter break, the sun was shining, weak and gray, outside, and it was not Hannibal looking at me, but Bev.

"Nope, we are not doing this," she confirmed. I knelt numbly, started picking up the pieces. She flicked her wand, and they spiralled neatly into the box.

"Doing what?" I asked, not moving from my place on the floor. The plaid on my flannel pants was faded, and I examined an incredibly interesting hole just above my knee.

"We are not moping around all break because Hannibal Lecter is a fucking idiot," she said, dragging my trunk out to the middle of the floor, "Now pack your shit; you're coming home with me."

She found my duffel bag within, and threw it in my lap.

"Here—grab socks, underwear, whatever. The train is leaving soon."

"Bev—" I sighed. She ignored me, and went to the dresser, another flick of her wand, sharp, and the record scratched to a stop, clothes started stuffing themselves haphazardly into my bag. I stood.

"Bev, I can't—"

"Of course you can, we have plenty of room."

"No," I broke in, snatching my bag out of the air and throwing it to lay on the bed, "I really can't."

She turned to face me. I'm taller than her now, though not by much, and just then, I didn't much feel like it. Her eyes were red, and I wondered if she could possibly have been crying, or if it was just a lack of sleep. I realized, as much as I'd missed Hannibal's company, I'd missed hers too; it felt like we'd spent less and less time together as the year went on. I didn't even know what things she might cry about, who she spent her days thinking of, what classes she thought she'd take next year. I wanted to reach for her.

"What happened, Will?"

A very good question. She raised a hand to press at her temple, and she looked tired. Her voice broke when she went on,

"I told you—I told you to talk to him. He really needed you."

Drowning. From somewhere very far away, I realized that's what this felt like. Like trying to suck in air, and getting only water, cold and burning. I drifted.

"I tried," I murmured, and it sounded weak, even to me. She laughed, and it was a humorless echo of her normal one.

"Fuck *trying*. The things I've heard, Will, he..."

I felt ill. I'd seen the marks on his neck that morning, too many to all have been from the boy I'd torn away from him. Of course I'd wondered how many, and where all they spread, and who they were from, felt the weight of possibility settle suffocating over my chest, recognition that any of those that he regretted today were my fault. That I had left him, helpless and reckless and angry, just because I couldn't face that anger being turned on *me*.

She must have seen the effect, because she softened, bit her lip.

"Nevermind," she sighed, the fight leaving her as quickly as it had come. "Come on. We're gonna miss the train."

"Bev, I'm not leaving."

Silence, thick. She glared at me, pretty and fierce. She was harder too, I realized. I wanted to stretch my mind out, find what had sharpened her edges like this, but I didn't.

"Fine," she said, throwing my bag to the ground, dropping her own on the other side of her feet. "I'll stay."

I argued, but Bev is nothing if not determined. She's sleeping up here now, limbs sprawled on top of the covers of the bed across from me, in a ratty t-shirt and cut off sweats. A very different moonlit picture than the one I conjure up in my memory, the one that I miss, with every piece of my being, but a welcome one all the same. She snores, and she's not much good at Risk, it turns out (oh, the irony) but maybe she's what I needed.

She's always seemed to know what that is better than I do.

Chapter End Notes

So if you're a Black Keys fanatic like I am, here's the song that I recommend for this part:

The Lengths

It was listened to a lot, in the course of writing this and the next few chapters, and I talked myself into believing it's totally plausible that this is the album Will is listening to, as the Keys always release on vinyl, and who knows, maybe he's into modern blues too :P

Chapter 23

Hannibal | *A series of unsent letters*

Dear Will,

I miss you.

Hannibal

Dear Will,

*I apologize, it has gotten out of hand. **I** have gotten out of hand. I, of course, must understand that you cannot reciprocate my affections. That you have found someone for whom you can, as is the way of things. I do not relish in the thought, but I am ready to be yours in whatever capacity you will allow. Set aside my selfishness, become your friend again.*

Please consider,

Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

I am furious. I am so unbearably angry with you it sets my teeth on edge, raises the magic from the dark spots. My aunt casts concerned gazes she does not yet voice as the candles topple from their holders and glasses shatter without warning, the lights go out in my presence. I believe I made a bird faint of fear yesterday. I apologize to her, assure her through clenched lips that it was inadvertent, that I am sorry, but in truth it calls to me. The sound of destruction rings pleasantly, settles comforting in veins in the absence of you. I fear it as I crave it and you are not here to temper me. I am enraged Will, I am so angry sometimes I feel it would swallow me whole.

Were you simply lying? Is that it? When you claimed to understand me, whispered that you knew me, held me in the night? All a series of farces for you?

*I did not ask for your friendship, nor your kiss, you gave them. To me. You knew to whom, do not pretend you didn't. Was it nothing to you, when we spent last Christmas together, lost in our own world, and I slept warm, inches away and felt that in your presence, finally, I could breathe? And when you kissed me, Will. Me. In case you have forgotten, me and not someone who has considered such things and nothing else for the entirety of their lives, not a normal person with their heart whole and ready to give, me. **Me**. Me, who could not understand, who could barely comprehend laughing together, wrestling on the floor - the basics of friendship, let alone a kiss. You were patient*

then, sat in the long silences to earn my trust, chuckled away my insults, allowed my sudden desires to be locked in a room with feigned deafness with good humor and your crooked smile. Took my hand and pulled me into a world I had not before been a part of. Did I not try for you then? Perhaps to everyone else it seemed I did not, but I did, I ***did****, and you knew. I thought that you knew. So when I wrote you letters all summer, all our hours spent together, though we were apart, all those agonizing moments I longed for you no matter where I was, fine operas, the most glittering of parties, alone on my sunlit bed, in the silent corners of midnight, was that not enough to properly convey that I was trying once more?*

I might hate you for pretending to know me, for that instant when I thought I had found someone to lean against, all of me, and you blew to dust. Turned smiling instead to someone whole and ready, shrugged away what I could give. And I let you. I let you do all of it, let you set up what had not existed before only to have you shatter it.

I thought you would see me, that I was attempting.

But you.

You saw nothing at all.

Foolish.

Dear Will,

I am in love with you so utterly I could not put it into writing if I tried. With this thought in mind, perhaps it would be best if we ceased to be present in each other's lives. I do not know if I can contain my emotions, I do not know if I can continue to see you without feeling that unbearable crumpling. I do not wish to crumple, I do not wish to make you uncomfortable, but I cannot cease loving you, though I have tried. Absence would be for the best.

I trust it does not matter greatly to you, one way or another.

Cordially,

Hannibal Lecter

Dear Will,

You are alone, and I am.

None of any of it matters, in the face of that.

I simply wish you were here.

Yours,

Chapter 24

Hannibal

I do not bring her flowers, because Bev is not the type of girl who would be moved by the already dying stems, functionless except to look at. The flowers would have been for Alana had the need arisen, but I can only be grateful she was not there that night. The thought of what I might have done, how I might have hurt her, twists my stomach. But hurting Bev is no more acceptable, simply because she is more likely to forgive and wears her skin thicker.

She ignores me as I sit down across from her. Eyes skirting to the side to eye the cake that I place on the table, but they go only as far as the plate before moving her attention firmly back to the book.

"Bev-"

Apologies are not one of my talents, I will confess. I do not enjoy the taste of my wrongdoings on my tongue, admitting them, confessing them. But I miss her, the faint outline of the bruise she left across my cheek not nearly as pleasant as the company of the girl herself. And Alana looks curiously from one to the other of us, wondering why we do not speak, why we have not done so since we returned from the holidays. Will—Will may as well no longer exist. Perhaps if I write it again and again, it will somehow become easier. Did it sound to you like I believed that journal? Not to me either. I carry the heartache, do my best to ignore it. There is nothing to be done there.

But here.

"I—"

"You what." She cuts me off flatly, a page flicked, and then another. Impatience, anger. She knows my eyes are on her, and her own are narrowed, all business, no give. "You're sorry?"

I… "Yes." A snort from her nose, derisive. "I am." It is defensive, but it is true. "I am incredibly sorry that I—"

"Completely lost your head?" She moves one page, then the next, and then page flipping doesn't seem to do it anymore and she slams the book down, volume rising with every syllable, decibel, after decibel, her shoulders squaring, back straight. For the first time, in a long time, I feel inordinately small. She towers.

"That you can't deal with your goddamn feelings because you're some precious broken toy, so you get drunk and make the rest of us do it?" Her breath is coming in angry huffs, the flush rising in her cheeks, her finger up, pointing, pinning. "Newsflash Lecter, we all have goddamn fucking issues. And I happen to have one *really* big one with being accosted by moronic guys who think they're entitled to the world—" Another laugh, it's ugly enough to match the worst of mine. "because their heart is broken and they've had a few drinks. You think you're special?"

She's hissing, I've never seen Bev this angry, I hadn't expected it, she's the first one to laugh, to convince others to, a smart remark and flippant cut enough. If she's been hurt before, I've only seen

it manifest in odd sleeping locations, in a tendency to find the best vantage point in a room. I can only stare.

“You are just like all of them.”

Her eyes find mine and we sit there frozen. She looks tired, her hair is pulled up into a messy bun, her clothes hang loose, circles dark beneath her eyes.

“This whole year, we have been patient with you.” A breath sucked in as though it pains her, released after a count of five. I can only watch, I am half stricken, half enchanted. The fury brings thunderclaps to mind, the exquisite sundering of a storm. “We have worked our butts off, to try and get you through whatever this—this thing is, you and Will are going through. I’ve given up time with my best friend, Hannibal. To spend it with you. Because I love you too, and I know, I *know* it hasn’t been easy.”

Her chest rises and falls, the crested waves of the ocean as the wind pushes the tides, my eyes down to where her heart beats beneath the sweater because I can’t seem to look at her face anymore. Heat creeps up my cheeks at the mention of Will, makes me sick, makes the stupid moisture snake into my gaze. Just the name, just the name, I am so beyond rescue. Away from her altogether now, chin to the floor.

“I know.” Her hands are out, suddenly, there’s still fury in her voice, but she’s touching me. “I know that this was all new for you, this whole giving a damn thing. How easy it is to feel let down, to close up because you knew the whole time it was going to fail anyway. That it *hurts*.” Her hands are a cross, neither silky, nor calloused, only skin, skin on my skin, her fingers on my wrists, twin desires to pull away and to reach back. I only sit there. She is real before me, as I have never been, made of earth and matter, solid, not ephemeral.

“But you can’t just do whatever you damn well please to make it go away, Hannibal. You’re not on your own. And it is goddamn selfish of you to act like no one in the fucking world can understand this except for you. That we don’t hurt when you hurt, hurt for you. That we don’t worry when you __”

I think there are tears in her voice, I think I could not have ever imagined Bev crying, let alone crying for me.

“And you were so fucking reckless.” The ache in her voice is deep-seated, comes from the very core of her, trickles into me and it tastes of shame, of guilt. “You could have really gotten yourself hurt like that, you could have really hurt someone else.”

Like *him*. Like her.

Slow gaze up, past the splotchy cheeks, the tracks of tears fallen, but only one or two, stubborn blinking, she is strong enough to allow them, but brave enough to stem the tide. I find her eyes.

“I hurt you.” I tell her quietly because there is nothing else to say. The truth of it burns, the truth always seems to, with me. “I’m sorry.”

Her lips are thin as they smile, and she nods. “Yeah. Yeah, you really did.” Palms squeeze against my hands and she lets go, drags the cake towards her. I wait, I sit, I do not think I breathe.

She does too. Considers.

“I’ll be better.” I mutter, make a promise I’m not sure I can keep, there’s softening between the lines on her face, she’s nodding, but she’s not done.

“If you ever try to kiss me again Hannibal Lecter, I will kick your ass, magical prodigy or not, I will do it. Alana will help.”

I do my best to look properly cowed, still hesitant to push too far, moments like these a complete mystery of correct balance to me. But a smile lurks in the corner of her mouth and she’s grinning after another minute slowly stretches by, even though there’s tension still.

“But you’re forgiven.”

I do believe this ought to be recorded as a first. The first emotional hurdle handled correctly. She sticks out her tongue at me, mouth full of frosting and cake and I frown at her and we laugh.

I feel farther and closer to her than we had been; consider, though I have known, that I am not entirely alone.

That, at least, is something.

H.L.

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will

I wish that I could make everyone else disappear. *That* would be magic worth learning. Make them disappear or make them totally unintelligible, so that I can't hear their whispers, or worse, feel the things they think are safely locked in their heads.

The girl next to Molly is talking about him right now. When he walked into the library, alone, he barely glanced this way. And to see him, the familiar, sharp, jut of his chin, the curve of his eyes, downcast, his lips pressed thin. He stood in front of the desk, waiting for the librarian and he was silhouetted in the soft gray light from the window, and god, it's—Our eyes met, just for a moment, and my breath caught, wondering if I could possibly break our silence to ask him to come over here.

Please.

And then the girl, red hair clashing with her ugly sweater, had seen him, curiosity piqued so suddenly that I felt it sharply behind my eyes. She nudged the other, the guy who I've occasionally been forced into awkward, dull small talk with since I'd started seeing Molly—on his part mostly pseudo-insulting questions about the muggle world—and mouthed *That's him* with raised brows. They smirked, and Hannibal smiled faintly, distantly at me in acknowledgment before disappearing into the stacks, suddenly in a hurry.

I hate them.

And even with Molly, things have been… strained. A few nights ago, in the shadows of my empty dorm, she ran her hands down my back. Nothing unusual, nothing that should be cause for concern, but just a little too much pressure on bruises that hadn't faded yet, and I'd hissed, wincing at the sharp ache. Angry with myself, as soon as I had, because, predictably, she stilled, brows furrowed, and pulled me closer so she could look over my shoulder at the yellowing spread of them along my spine.

Her eyes narrowed, her mouth pulled tight. She was trying hard not to say what she knew would make me defensive, but she didn't need to say it; her disapproval, her anger, and a creeping fear that tasted coppery on my tongue were loud just the same. She's no Hannibal, no ironclad walls she can hide behind.

"It's nothing," I mumbled, pulling myself from her arms, reaching for my shirt. Touch suddenly seemed very unappealing.

"That's not nothing, Will."

Silence as I pulled it over my shoulders, only the whisper of fabric, and she simmered, sat up on the edge of the bed.

"...Did he do that?"

No need to clarify who she meant, I only shrugged, continued buttoning. Her fists clenched in the coverlet, she looked to the side, processing.

"It was a stupid fight, we were both drinking," Not entirely truth, maybe not quite a fight, that moment in the hall, but close enough.

"Will," she said, and the anger had left her voice, replaced by a very rough, tired sound. I stopped, gave her the courtesy of eye contact. I felt crushed, small. "I have to—and don't you dare lie to me… do I need to worry?"

It felt like a stone in my stomach.

Does she need to worry about him?

Does she need to worry about the part of me that is always with him?

"Don't worry," I tried, but it came out flat and deadpan. I kissed her hair; she smelled sweet, vaguely floral.

We both knew it wasn't an answer.

And I know it's not fair, but I don't even want her near me right now. It's not her fault that her friend just whispered *I wonder what else his mouth can do* with a smirk and—

My quill snapped, sorry. What was I talking about? Oh yes. Mouths and murmurs and completely inappropriate musings that Molly does nothing to dissuade, even though she was there that night, after I went to bed. She just smiled at them distractedly and went on with her notes, her silence damning.

A headache is blooming just beneath the electric hum of jealousy, and if there was ever any hope of me finishing the chapter I'm supposed to have read, it is long gone now. Each new mention of that night strikes an ugly, flat chord in me, equal parts rage and pain and guilt, and a slinking, dirty feeling of curiosity. I can't ask him. Even if we were talking, what would I even say?

Gee, Hannibal, they're saying you had quite the night before break. Feel like re-hashing it with me, so I can agonize over just how many other people have had their hands on you?

No. This is one of those things that will pass, people will forget, I've already forgotten, it's out of my mind. Or, it will be. If they would just stop *talking*—

I must have sighed a little too huffily, because Molly finally looked up from her parchment, laid a hand on my arm. I couldn't meet her worried eyes, angry, and ashamed without completely understanding why.

I want to go to him, I want it so badly. But I'm afraid that I've pretty much fucked things up, and I'm not sure what I would even find if I went to the corner table I know he's sitting at.

Would he talk to me? I wouldn't, if I were him.

I muttered an excuse, I'm not even sure if it makes sense, something about Potions and bezoars, and I started slamming things into my bag. I don't know where I'll go, but I know that I can't sit

here silently while they giggle about how badly I failed my best friend.

I’m sure their eyes will follow me as I leave, and that the ever-present, silent question of what the hell Molly is doing with me will hang heavy in the lack of laughter.

Right now, I really don’t care.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late posting today, I just started back at class this week so it's been a little crazy ^_^'
By the way, Ro and I have loved your comments this week, it's so nice to see everyone reacting the way we did as we were writing it (yelling and crying, mostly at this point). You guys really keep us inspired :)
—Q

Chapter 26

Hannibal

“Sorry—”

The door to the study room pushes open, the squeaking hinges interrupting the silence, announcing the arrival of intrusion into the space. The unfortunately familiar smile of a voice.

“I didn’t know anyone was in here, it looked empty from the window.” Her laugh comes with just the slightest hint of apology, sounds irritatingly similar to someone else’s when he thinks he’s done something that might be this side of inconvenient. “But everywhere else is full.”

I am hidden behind my pile of books, the neat piles of parchment, and the angle, but I can envision the irritating swish of the ponytail from side to side.

“Do you mind if I—”

The text down and she pauses, speech faltering, though to her credit, the smile does not, wavers uncertain for a moment, but determinedly holds its place, even as a strange shade of confusion fills her eyes. I pretend not to know the source of it, ignore the prickle of nauseous guilt that curves through me to watch her instead, unblinking. Though she doesn’t move, the whole of her body sways back towards the door subconsciously, away. Away. She would like to be away from me. A flicker of fear through her, imperceptible perhaps even to herself, but the sudden sour flit of chemical response wafts through the air.

We have not spoken directly since she and Will… since, well. We have not ever been alone in a room together.

Perhaps she is wise, to fear.

“I can just—”

“There is space.” I say, because I am stubborn. Because I am unwilling to acknowledge that I am in any way bothered by her presence and if she is here than she is not with him, and somehow, viciously, the knowledge of that drives me. “You may stay if you please.”

She weighs the invitation, large blue eyes finding mine, and I can sense that the need to makes her frown. Attempting to parcel out meaning and intent, sharp enough to know there is little possibility of sincere desire to be helpful, but unsure what falls beneath that. She would prefer I be honest, tell her to leave if that is what I wish, invite her to stay if I truly do not mind her company, but I have little care for what she would prefer. I have said it, devoid of certain intention, and she can make of it as she will.

And how does she find Will then? Simply transparent. The thought astounds me.

In the space between us there is hesitance, a curving of mouth in unhappy thought, and finally she sets her bag on the desk, in the seat closest to the door and sits. She does not pull out her work

though, opens her lips once, closes them, again, fingers pulling through the ends of her hair. One more time, the sounds not made heavy in the air.

I watch the performance.

“Yes?” I level the words at her, because I am not afraid to suss out intent, and she looks at me again.

A breath. Short at the curt speech. But her voice reflects no change in temperament, forges on in an approximation of friendliness.

“Sorry, it’s not like—I mean, it’s none of my business, but,” A tendency to ramble then. “Weren’t you supposed to meet Will,” The name falls casually from her lips where it does not belong and settles loudly in the space between us. The ice comes to freeze the panes of my face, stutters the syllables, but she finishes the thought “... ten minutes ago? He seemed pretty excited this morning, to see—”

Blank stone up to her, determinedly shelving away the dark viscous tendrils that threaten to come to life again. “I sent him an owl.”

Her lips clamp down, but she’s frowning now. A touch of narrowness to her eyes. Good. It was beginning to grate, the false pretense of geniality.

“And it is.” There’s something starting to pound in my veins, the loud beat of my heart in my ears, the simultaneously frozen and fevered punch of confrontation, and the edges of hiss wrap around my throat, “none of your concern.”

The sentiment lands with impact, falls for a moment, silent, and then explodes. For the passing of a second, we suspend, as she searches for the correct response, and then fierceness comes instead. Sudden spark.

“Actually Hannibal,” Slow, the speech, considering, and then gathered and sharp. I do not like my name on her lips either. The distaste that surfaces and echoes around it, I suppose, the same way I say hers. “it kind of is.”

Impassive, I blink.

Her fingers drum against the table.

“Will is my boyfriend.” A stunningly brilliant statement of fact.

“And this may shock you to hear, because it’s super clear you think you’re the only one who can tell he’s pretty great, but I care about him.” A faint humorless chuckle. “Don’t drop dead okay?” Some would go shrill, but her low voice sinks lower as the aversion swirls louder, a ferocious intensity along the fault lines, only just brimming out. Though she herself fails to capture any of my attention, the display is… interesting. “So yes, that makes it my concern.”

Splotches of red flush along her cheeks as the dam breaks, piece by piece. And I wonder how long she has been waiting to level this speech at me, run the lines through her mind longingly, but swallowed them down.

For Will’s benefit, she would say. But for her own, I suspect.

She half rises as she presses on, a whirl of emotion to clash against the veneer of my ice. Hues of life and warmth in it come not to melt but evaporate.

“You couldn’t meet him, because—why?” Her hands gesture out across my books. “Too much of next month’s homework keeping you up at night? Some life or death matter involving tea leaves that made you have to blow off your best friend?”

“Exactly.” I do not stand, barely shift at all, except the raise of my eyes to look at her, her knuckles curving white against the wood. “Astute as always, you have managed to perfectly understand the situation all on your own. I see what he finds so appealing about your company, what a tremendous marvel of a brain.”

She is silent a moment.

“I may not have top marks in everything.” Her voice is pushed soft. “But at least I’m a capable human being, and I’m not sure that can hold for all of us in the room.”

What Will wants.

I ignore the curve of thought, the glance of ache it brings, burning raw over barely sealed wounds.

“How delightful for you.”

A sound from her throat that is pure frustration.

“You’re making him crazy.” She exaggerates the slowness of speech. “Maybe you don’t know, because you seem to have some trouble with basic interaction, and your friends.” I frown at that, defensive of her tone. “Probably haven’t filled you in. But let me say it again. You are making him crazy.” A slam of hands down across the table, wishing clearly that it were my face. “And do you know who has to watch him hurt? When he’s sad suddenly for no reason and doesn’t want to do anything, when he’s miserable because you decide you can’t make enough of an effort to say Hello? You’re so smart, all those fancy words; tell me, Hannibal, tell me you don’t know that he’s hurting.”

Because he is the only one capable of that.

“That you’re hurting him?”

I do not look away from her gaze, say nothing.

But I know.

I know and I have tried and I cannot. I know and it is me, and I know. Thoughtless and friendless, monstrous. Frozen. I know. Selfish and self pitying. In love. In love and incapable. Incapable of the things for which I long. And he, the spaces between us...

“I am trying to give him what he wants.” The words burst out of me and surprise us both with their sudden growling sincerity. Again, calmer, through the grit of teeth. “I am attempting to give him what he wants, weighed against what I want.”

She shakes her head, “You talk to him and you won’t, you can and you can’t. He comes back from a party and there are bruises on his back.”

Internally, I cringe.

“What do you want from him?” The question with an answer come too late. “Why can’t you just be happy for him?”

Perhaps because it destroys me—all of this. Perhaps, because of that.

“Or leave him alone.”

If I had said it, it would be a threat, not veiled, or thin. But from her it’s just all at once tired exhortation. That comes out with a modicum of sudden trepidation, as though she has crossed some boundary she had not intended to. Some invisible line which she had not sought to broach and now fears the consequences of pressing. But she does not hide that fear when she looks at me, she has said what she has meant to say all along.

I have nothing in response.

We stay frozen. Stuck there for a spell.

Then with a sigh, she’s swept up her books again. “You know what, nevermind.” The smile returns, quavering. “You stay here, be alone.” Her hair shakes with her head, bangs flying tousled across her forehead. “I made plans and I intend to keep them.”

She’s gone with the slam of a door. And I pick my book back up, attempt not to think of them.

But it is hard to follow the lines.

They tremble with the shaking of my fingers.

Chapter 27

Will

---

32 days since we last spoke.

I...

This isn’t sustainable.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal

"I am going to kill him."

The words hissed out of my mouth, hands to my hair, fingers trembling through it, the sudden uneven layers I found there, the spots almost entirely bald. It filled a hideous panic through me that I could not control. "I am going to disembowel that inane little—"

The breaths came hard, catching in my throat. Such an entirely childish thing to be having a rage attack about in the middle of the hallway. But in that moment, journal, I forgot that I am a wizard, I forgot that about school, and spells, expulsion, there was only anger, dark, and memories, cold.

I could see *her* watching me tremble from the corner of my eye, and though it barely registered it was enough, enough to push it further, to sweep the air away. Chaos clashing through my veins, the torches flickering in their posts, people were gathering, closer, cloying.

Go away.

My mouth formed the words but no sound, stuck in my throat once more, rendered back to mute, *Go away*. The panic higher, the lack of air, black at the edges of my vision. I was going to faint, or collapse. *Explode*, the madness murmured, *no measure of control now, is there? Go away*.

And then from nowhere, an anchor in the storm. Will's calloused palm, rough from all his flying, from long days spent outside, all these things I know about him rushing in, so familiar. I think I smiled down at him, standing there, a mad smile. In every way I had missed it on me, he'd been so far, we'd been so far, but the touch, splintered everything else away.

I looked at him, chest heaving, the dancing spots of color converging around his face. He was white, deadly calm. Brave, always, to find his way to me.

"He's gone," the murmur of words is quiet, grim. "Or at least he thinks he is, the transfiguration should kick in—" A pause, a thump. He's proud and despite everything else, I'm proud of him. "The Professor will take care of him, come on."

And he's grabbed me, leading me away, not stopping, not letting me pull away though I try, my heart still hammering through my veins, threading, blind for me, a path through the corridors until we're in a room that's empty and far. He pushes me into an armchair. I do not stop to wonder why there's an armchair in the middle of the classroom, why it's soft and there's music playing from nowhere. I only look at him with wild eyes as he reaches carefully out to me, to the shorn remains on my head. A movement to shift back, but I don't. I let him. Always let him.

He should know by now that I am his.

My mind wants to close my eyes, but I win the fight to keep them open, shallow exhales, too fast too slow, and he touches me, runs his fingers through the raw layers, through the patches of skin. He knows, even I do not truly know, but he knows. The flashes of mud and dirt, in the orphanage it was short, a poor razor to the skull to prevent lice from spreading. *Ugly*. The word shudders through me, common, low, and edges of the hair are enough to push me towards it again. I am weak. Ruined, always. Other memories vying just below.

But Will—a faint gasp from my lips that goes ignored because I wish it to—Will touches it as though it were whole, as though it were beautiful, as though *I* were—

He is leaning over me, sitting as I am he is taller, hands fully through it, threading and stroking, every last bit, not an inch escaping his hands, one step closer, then another, until my head is against his stomach, his arms around me, bent into me.

As though I were beautiful, even like this. He wants me to know, he is near me, around me, through me.

Cresco

He murmurs, his wand is far away, forgotten in his bag, but he doesn't need it, not when our minds are twined, his own wrapped around mine, warm. The only comforting force I have ever known. So close.

Factually, I am aware in that moment, that it is whole again, that it is as it was this morning, that it is immaculate and swept, perfectly cut. Factually, I know, but still I shudder. Still he holds me.

"I could get Bev…" he murmurs, it tastes of a sorrow that I don't fully understand, but recognize. I don't know why it's on his lips though, why it even forms in his brain, but I only am aware that if he steps away, I feel I would come apart at every seam.

"I've missed you." He tells me quietly as I shake my head into him, *Don't go*. But I'm in no place to answer to that. I hold onto it still though, even now, hours later, the soft glimmer against my chest.

Unbearably. I reply, finally, though he cannot hear.

H.L.

Chapter End Notes

You may recognize that illustration, and that's because I snuck it into the sketchbook for Year Four when I posted, here

I am also pleased to tell you, the Year Five sketchbook will be up soon, so keep an eye out :)

—Q

Chapter 29

Will

It is, regardless of the circumstances, so *painfully* good to look over and see his sleeping form.

I wish that it hadn't taken Paul Krendler and a poorly thought-out curse to drape him here, warm next to me, though not touching. Exhausted. But I'll take it. If he's only here because he can't be trusted to be by himself for the moment, then I might even thank the universe for creating a creature like Krendler.

Shards of moonlight split the curtains, outlining the smooth, familiar jut of his cheek. Silver and strange. And I know, I know things about him now that I wish I didn't, not because it matters to me, but because I know that he didn't want to share them, and it feels like a gross, if accidental intrusion that I have seen the snow and the mud and heard the screams.

He looks so soft now, unhappiness fled in the quiet in and out of his breath. Nothing like the terrible thing today that was building in him, an animal snarl I'd never heard, when I thought for a minute that he was really going to end a life in the hallway.

They didn't understand why the reaction, why he would nearly lose control over something so small as hair, a curse aimed to humiliate, not to harm. I didn't either, hadn't been there when it happened, though I heard the terrible sound of pain and knew it immediately for what it was. Shouts from down the hall, and I knew *something*, I…

It was like before, when he reached out to me in the grip of a nightmare, I felt the pull, anger and beneath that, terror. I dropped my books running to get to him, barely even registered the grim-faced jinx I aimed at Krendler's retreating back, before I was ripped from my own mind into Hannibal's, and saw things he'd only ever alluded to. The girl, and if I reached for it, I could hear her name, the men in masks, and the way they they ceased to be. Chafing and cold, at my neck, my wrists, the crunch of bone in my arm and the splintering pain that came with it. His panic built, and like waves against a floodgate, the images flickered, trickled through the cracks. Sensations that didn't wholly make sense—cruelty, the older boys laughing, hunger, the weight on my chest when I tried to speak, things swirling through me so rapidly I had only barely felt one, grasped the coattails of a memory when another took hold.

Four years of occlumency, and I only barely split myself from him again. My hands were shaking, so were his. He was terrifying, he was terrified, there were too many people around him, and I shoved them all aside. Someone was yelling distantly not to touch him, that he was *out of control* and that phrase kindled hot, bitter rage in me, remembering a night when he'd tried to reach, and I had turned away.

Not again.

"Hannibal," I said, my throat catching. He was still far away, the words he'd spat, vitreous, gone now, there was no sound coming from his mouth. I reached, and heard a gasp. Not mine or his, I ignored it, unimportant. Background noise to the feel of his hand, warm, the tingle of familiar

magic where we connected. Our palms pressed again. I wrapped my fingers around his and squeezed, tugged him gently back to being, and he smiled then.

I muttered empty, calming words, pulled him out of the throng of people, and we retreated to safety. And… touch. I couldn't stop myself, my hands, they—I only had some vague intention of fixing what had been taken, but once my fingers brushed the ragged edges of his hair, I couldn't stop, I ran them through the mess Krendler had made, stroking soft, trying to tell him through touch how much I had missed him, how afraid I had been that I had lost him, during the weeks without talking. How scared I'd been that every drop of color he'd brought me in my otherwise gray world would have to be enough to warm me for the rest of my life.

You see, he's at the core of me. I don't know how else to say it. What I was doesn't exist anymore, I have been irrevocably shattered, and he holds the pieces together.

Maybe he doesn't need me the way I need him, but as long as he let me, I wrapped my arms around him and forgot. The counter-curse I wasn't even aware I knew, whispered into his hair, wandless, but I knew somewhere deep that it would work; maybe this is where my magic comes from. This well of feeling that I have tried so hard to bury.

It's always been him.

He is put back together as much as I am able, he took tea with shaking hands and though I did not touch or reach again, wary of pushing too far when I had already taken so many liberties—taken advantage even, you could argue—he agreed silently when I asked if he would stay with me.

And then whispers in the dark. Our bodies inches from each other, squeezed into my four post, my hand nearly brushing his where they lay between us, and somehow knowing *why* and *how much* I wanted to reach for it made it more bearable. An ember in my chest that I no longer have the energy to try and extinguish, but it's better than trying to forget, being consumed by it.

I didn't ask if he wanted to talk about it, about what I'd seen or about the fight that was never really a fight, that had now apparently been put on hold. He just did, when he was ready. Not a lot, but enough.

"Her name was Mischa," he said. His voice had not sounded so ragged since a gray day when we'd hidden from Sneed in a broom cupboard; only a year ago, but it seems so distant. He lay completely still, on his side under the comforter that I knew he would normally wrinkle his nose at, saturated with my scent, the cologne that he hates so much. I watched him solemnly in the dark world of blankets, his eyes somewhere far away even as his chest rose and fell in front of me.

"What happened to her?" I asked, knowing even then that I was treading very dark waters. I had the fleeting impressions of memory, had heard her cries, seen a grasping hand, but it was all muddled in his head, whether by the anger or by time. The way a photograph wears soft at the edges if you handle it often enough, the colors fading.

"I—" he swallowed, closed his eyes. "I don't know. She is dead. They took her from me, that is all that's there. I was not myself for... some time, after."

The words ached of snow, of cold. I had seen glimpses of this too, of being hungry and freezing, and there was some terrible knowledge growling at the edges of me, but every time I brushed close to it, it danced away. And also, in the violent twine of our minds, I had seen flashes of those other moments. I saw them take her, felt pain, a door slammed, rage, and the crackle of dark magic. I

heard screams that did not belong to a little girl, but the men who took her, and watched as blood pooled in the white expanse of snow.

I watched him carefully, reaching without meaning to, I think… I think he really doesn't know. There's holes in the floors of his mind, places he can't go, locked doors, and I wonder if this is why he has nightmares, these blank spaces, if they are what haunts him. I wonder what would happen if he stumbled into one.

I wonder if he would ever find his way back out.

We were silent for a long time. I thought he might have fallen asleep, but still I whispered into the dark,

"I'm sorry."

I meant for everything, and I think he knew, his hand brushed mine beneath the covers, a solemn acknowledgement, maybe.

I watched the shadows shift until he fell asleep.

Chapter 30

Hannibal

Life has become...more tolerable since the last time I wrote. The situation is not yet fixed by any means, but there is a frail peace in place. A sort of ease that stretches over all the broken pieces when I envision it, soothing and soft, connects and binds them together even if it cannot properly heal them...yet.

Bev almost dropped her mug the first time Will walked in to our weekly study sessions in the Hufflepuff common room. We have, all four of us, often joined by Brian and Jimmy, worked together since, since this all began, but never here. This was the escape, the safe place—no curly hair, no Gryffindors—a guarantee of sanctuary. I spirited the glass from her just in time to save it, and though a little of the overly dark liquid spilled out onto the couch, there were no more shatters to be dealt with. God knows, we did not need anymore of those. I set it down as Will moved in towards us, slumped and sheepish, every awkward bend of his body preemptively cringing, preparing to be sent away. But I only offered him a wan smile, avoiding Bev's gaze, and moved to make space. We both held our breaths as he settled in next to me, dropping slow into the place made for him, our shoulders brushing—electric, on my part, his proximity easing straight into me. Through a distant haze, Alana made some sort of laughing comment that we were all finally going to get good grades in Muggle Studies, yelping as Bev elbowed her. But I could barely hear them, simply continued scratching my pen against paper, aware of his presence, of the fashion in which, despite everything, it added a lazy comfort to my body, a pleasant familiarity that had been so burning in its absence. Opened me up without even trying, further with every breath, settling into me as though it belonged there. The entire room seemed altered somehow, dreamlike, a kind of unreality possessing me. Or was that the simple sensation of happiness beginning to creep somewhere in my stomach without any sort of permission. I had not been truly happy in a very long time. I had forgotten its effects.

Not one to mince words, but possessing of an almost preternatural ability to show discretion in this situation, fraught with minefields as it has been, Bev said nothing until I rose for more coffee, her footsteps trailing mine across the room.

"Is this okay?" She'd heard about the hair debacle in as few words as possible, but other memories were still fresh in her mind. "Cause if he's gonna send you into another tail spin, I'll kick his ass out." She wouldn't let me turn to the sink, put herself in front of me. Aggressive, fierce in her loyal way. Unbothered by stepping directly into my air. "I will. This is your turf."

I promised to be better for her, so I forced myself to answer; no slip away, no words twisted into riddles. Away from him, it was easier to process.

"I am uncertain." I shrugged, honest. A part of me wanted to laugh, to tell her of course it is fine, it is Will, he was always going to...return. But that was the desperate part, the part that would keep him, even if it was for the worst, even if it would only lead to more disaster. The rest of me, the aching, angry slices were more wary. Warier still at my reaction towards him, at the pull and need, the connection that has caused me so much strife and already I was allowing myself to fall into once more. As foolishly as before, no lessons learned.

"I do not know, Bev." I said again, her sharp awareness on me, searching. Since I had returned it had been better, with the three of us at least, I have touched wine without incident, I come to do my work with them willingly, I even went to Hogsmeade, though whispers followed me everywhere. They did not so much bother me—or at least I could tolerate the mutters that ranged from *handsome* to *slut*—but they sent Bev's hackles rising, Alana and I only just pulling her away from a particularly smug Slytherin drawling to them, and anyone else who'd listen, about how he'd had me first, played me better than his cello.

Just let me kick his ass. She'd pleaded, shifting her weight in an attempt to turn back, causing us all to collapse. We ended up in a heap, shoulders shaking in mirth.

She does not want to go back to how it was.

"But you want him to stay?"

I nodded and she pursued her lips, but answered in kind. Wordlessly I rinsed the mugs out in the sink, handed her back Alana's and her own and kept Will's for myself. Months does not make one forget how a person likes their coffee.

When we returned, his eyes shining pleased at the sudden surprise, settled down to our books once more, I tilted towards him, just barely, inhaled for a count, then spoke. The first casual words I had addressed to him in over a year, my heart pounding.

"Perhaps you can help me understand—" I paused as he started, jumped to attention in the space of a second, shock rippling through him and then perfect concentration, eager. Ready, he seemed to want to show me; he could help me to understand whatever it is I wanted. I could see Bev rolling her eyes in the corner of my vision, Alana's doe faced sigh. "—how exactly a motorcycle functions?"

Boys. The stage whisper echoed, followed by a giggle, Will laughing suddenly as well and my smile not yet there, but lurking just below the surface. He'd leaned over me then, to explain, an arm landing hesitant on my shoulder as he moved to peer at the textbook on my lap. The happiness roared.

I cannot explain journal, what has come over him. Not then, nor the week after, nor the week after that. Nor why he has taken to joining me in the library at lunches, sneaking in a set of sandwiches for us despite my disapproving glance. Forcing one into my hand and making me eat, threats to accidentally drip olive oil on a page if I do not chuckled into my ear. I cannot say for certain why he is not spending this time with Molly, nor the source of the sudden ease between us. He does not mention and I do not pry. But this, I think, at least is manageable.

Do not misunderstand, I still...

Every last cell of me yearns for him when he is near, my mind craves to connect, my body to be touched. But everything is better, I find, with his affections back in hand, with him close, with permission to be close in return. (Though in those moments, when we are quiet, curved together on the couch, dusk's dim light filtering through the windows, the rain pounding loud on the panes, his feet almost pressed in under my legs, knees tucked into his chest skimming my arms. It seems as though I might just… that I could, that we—)

I will learn to live with it. The time already lost is more and more painfully evident. I cannot waste more of it. I can only...hope he feels the same, though I do not trust hope at all.

H.L.

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will

I don't think you should see him.

Her words are still lingering here, though she's left. She said it with such resolve, not meeting my eyes, but her teeth edged at her bottom lip.

I had seen this coming. Since the incident in the hall, she's watched him with wary eyes, searched mine for clues when I come back from the soft evenings spent with my friends. And I have made myself… difficult, too. Around hers. Their distaste might not be such a problem for someone else, but when their caustic tone is so openly read, as it is for me, I find it hard to not comment, and my bitter, snarky words do little to move me back into their good books. If there was ever a place for me there.

So when she said it, our backs against the stone beneath the window, records spread around the floor of my room, I didn't answer. Just leaned my head back, the sensation of threads snapping. And I was tired, so tired.

"Will, please. I'm telling you what I think, and I think he's not good for you. I think..."

She drew her legs up, long and pretty, wrapped her arms around herself. I hated that she felt like she couldn't tell me something, but at the same time, I knew I didn't want to hear what she was about to say.

"I think *he's* not good."

It hurt, even coming from Molly. Maybe more so, to know that this is how she sees him. How she'll start to see me.

The sun was fading, and the light behind us was buttery yellow-orange, highlighting dust motes like tiny, scattered stars. Her eyes looked almost gray when she turned them to me, and I knew this was the last time I would see her like this. She wasn't just telling me what she thought, she was giving me a choice.

I wish that… not that I hadn't met him, never that. But sometimes I wonder if there's another life, a universe somewhere where she and I could be happy. Where *I* could be happy with what she offered, a life that was as easy and exhilarating as flying. I can see the days that we will never spend, the home we will never build, and there's melancholy in that. A gray ache, watching my fingers grasp at something and missing it by inches.

And as clearly as I can picture the road that Molly and I would travel together, Hannibal's is a blank map. He doesn't want me as a whole, he wants pieces, which I will enthusiastically offer him. If he only ever needs me as a friend, a secret-keeper, a study partner, that's what I'll be. And if

maybe, someday, there is more… if the look that I sometimes catch him wearing when we're alone, something that softens his eyes, if it's anything more than—

Well, I will wait. There may not be a future for me there, but until the lines fill out and it becomes clear that he no longer wants me at all, I will hand him each bit of myself I can spare.

And she knows this, I know she knows. I can never give myself completely to anyone else, because he'll always have that hold. Even in our best moments, she's watched me with a sad knowledge, something that I never understood until now.

Not see him?

You could just as well ask me not to breathe.

"I have to," I said. Dull. Not a proclamation, not a challenge, just a statement of fact. My name is Will Graham, the time is 4:37 pm, and I am inexplicably, irrevocably entwined with Hannibal Lecter. There's something freeing in knowing, even if it hurts.

Molly sighed, a breath she had been holding. She leaned her head against my shoulder, and it was not an invitation for more touch, but a concession. Careful apathy, where she's never hidden anything before.

"I know," she said. I didn't put my arm around her, where once I would have jumped at the chance. "I just wish you didn't."

Chapter End Notes

((On a note that is unrelated to this part of the story, Ro and I recently finished year six (yay!) and it punched out at just over 80k words (YAY!). Just thought you guys would like to know, we are still *well* ahead of schedule :D NOW ONTO YEAR SEVEN))

Chapter 32

Hannibal

He comes to me as though in a dream.

I have been sitting there, waiting. I think, waiting for him. My feet tucked into my chest, the evening unusually mild, those brushes of spring back again, winsome trails of something warm tucked into the chill, drifting in and out of the icy breezes. The smell of smoky ash seems interwoven with the first hints of wildflowers. Spring has come curving back around. Spring when we first kissed, our breaths mingling, our lips pressing, his laughter across my skin. Spring, I did not think I would ever long for it, beauty of the kind that eludes me. But the winter has been endless, unyielding, winter in me, winter surrounding me. It seemed as though it would never cease, the barren expanses of white stretching out forever, broken by little more than the grey branches of trees. But tonight Spring whispers warm in my ear, of melting ice, of the thaw to come. Visits me with its loveliness.

I sit in the lengthening shadows of the forest, the snuffles of the nifflers long gone, asleep somewhere, they are, comfortable, waiting. Waiting, as I am, for the first sign of change, that inexplicable moment when an ending twists into beginning. That breathless spark beneath my skin, that murmurs of soon having carried me out of the chattering common room, down the deserted hallways and past the waning candles, out to the last glimmers of sunset, the moonrise starting slow.

A full moon always rises at sunset.

Its light is silvery, flooding everything, drenching the world in hollow brightness. It dims even the stars, consuming them. Only room for one orb in the sky, a silent spell cast that no magic could ever approach. The prickle of night's ritual. And then a different prickle, the awareness along my arms, down my spine. The approaching storm touching down, the air electric.

He comes to me as though in a dream, his eyes dark.

I rise, pulled, and he, closer. I cannot read his features in the faint of light, but I do not think I need to. Do I not know? Do I not know him? There is no flush of laughter now, no grasping fingers, no fumbling mouths. We are not as we were. We are different, sharpened by the movement of time, by the loss of each other. But I have no need to be who I was then, not anymore. Time that has gone has gone, I only need him. A wild, raw, excitement erases the anticipation, a long wait drawing to a close. That vicious hope that I have kept back and back, curling slow through my breaths as the moon draws the field away from the world. Somewhere arcane, we go, the place only we share. He and I. Somewhere no one else could tread. It is not tenable to stay here, I know. But it is right that we find it for the first time tonight, everything else extinguished. He is real, and I am real, and the world beyond is but a distant imagination.

"Hannibal—" He stops in front of me, pauses, the only creature unaltered by the spell, just exactly as he is, a step in front of me. We are other, we are together, we are so achingly human. Twisted into shapes, twisted into each other. The word echoes into the silence and fades, I only look at him, inhale his lines, follow the maze of his features, forget that breathing is necessary at all. He is open

to the explorations, to me, whatever fear clung wavering and flying away. *I love him,* I know. And he is here, has found me. And now I must only find him and all will right itself.

He doesn't draw away as I close the space, taller than him, his head tilting back as mine bows down. For the lingering expanse of heartbeat, we stay, not touching. Eyes locked, I can see every strand of hair, every dip in his skin. The last bleak stand of distance. Its haunting note presses through the air for one moment longer. And then.

And then I rip it away, no place for it anymore, cast it far, draw the blade and tear through it. Dripping in moonlight. I kiss him. My fingers up through his hair, grasping, firm, he is warm beneath my touch, my fingers, my lips, I watch until the blue of his eyes disappears behind lashes, and allow my own to drift closed as well, our mouths moving. The rush of coming together, the crescendo, louder, and louder, crashing.

A little like falling, a little like dying, a death of sorts, the beautiful crumbling of what was. Just as the last kiss had been.

There is no promise of resurrection. It could be an ending.

But it does *not* taste of one.

He comes to me as though in a dream. His eyes dark. I kiss him, we kiss, he does not draw away.

H.L.

Chapter 33

Will

"Wow."

"Indeed."

"...wow."

He laughs, and I think there must be no better place to be in the world than looking up at his moonlit smile,

"So you have said."

"So is this… does this mean…?"

"It means whatever you want it to mean—though I believe I've just made my feelings clear."

"...so you want us to be—"

"Together, I hope. Whatever else follows."

--

It's not the first time. We've kissed before, and we were small and unsure, grasping at the only thing that made sense, the only thing that felt right. Momentary. Consuming, yes, but brief, only echoes of something bigger. Hesitation. Caution.

This was nothing like that.

This is the absence of space, sudden and thrilling. My hands were shaking when I approached him, his figure dark among the pines. This is not some nightmare-fueled expedition into the woods, though I felt the pull just as strongly as I have on all those nights. He was *waiting*. I had decided, today, as I sat in the window, watching the sun fade, that I would taste truth on my tongue before the night was over, bitter and terrifying as it might be, that I would spill the words and let him decide what to do with them. And there he was, like he already knew.

And his name has barely left my lips, solemn, reverent, I want to tell him, I need him to know, and he moves, just inches now. Looking up, and he's meeting my eyes, something cold brushing down my spine, these spaces electric. And in this hush, even the trees holding their breath, he has flung open his doors, and I see him. Every wall carefully constructed, all those secret places his eyes wander to, torn down, destroyed, and all the beauty, strangeness, the lost nights and the longing, everything he'd kept from me exposed. A gasp with no breath; he's in my every atom.

When we kiss—when he kisses *me*, the difference stark—it is not grasping. It is not misunderstanding. It is crashing, *crushing*, it is everything finally right on a quantum level, his hands lifting my face, in my hair, and in his eyes I am not shattered, I am something strange and precious, desirable. *Necessary*. Power in being vital, but also in having a vital need met, my eyes

close, letting the sensation of his mouth moving mine take me, let him lead and it's so unbearable, impossible, to think that I could ever have been this close to him and let him go.

I make a noise against his lips, brokenly, but I am whole.

All the midnight walks through the woods, all the evenings and fireplaces and lazy afternoons, they are all here, part of this conversation we have without words. And when we part, his eyes and mine hopeful, there will be time for every word I have never said. I will smile down, fingertips chasing the feel of his lips on mine, etching the sensation into the walls of my mind, and I will tell him my truth, though now it only seems a shade of what we've already said.

--

"How long?"

"Truly?"

I nod, and he looks away, as though counting the days. His hand frees itself from mine, wraps around my torso—chills. The hesitance behind each touch fades with every step.

"Always. From the first word between us."

A wry look his way, though I am shaken, shaking, and already I want to close the spaces again, press myself to him and speak the only way I really feel capable of.

"You might have said something then."

He laughs, and I feel it roll through me like a hymn.

"I'm saying it now."

We come together again.

Chapter 34

Hannibal

Hello journal,

I am adding a greeting because it has been quite a while sinc-

NO, WILL, YOU MAY NOT READ THIS. CEASE YOUR ATTEMPTS.

And if I don't-

NO.

Alright journal, I believe he is gone. Still here, of course, muttering against me, even though he should be ASLEEP—

should not, I'm fine.

AWAY, WILL.

Even though he *should* be asleep, because it is almost one in the morning, and his eyes are drooping, rather amusingly; shutting every other moment or so. When I nudge him, tell him it would be wise to begin making his way towards his bed, especially if he hopes to be awake enough to avoid wandering into trouble, for example, walking straight into a professor, eyes barely open, slurring his words, (as occurred three nights ago), he only pulls a face and burrows further. And god forbid I attempt to remind him he has still not completed the essay on rune comparisons he has due tomorrow. That he will now have to wake early to do so. The grumbling that ensues after that FACT is truly something. Nonsensical noises that drift in and out of actual words, dipped in heavy drowsiness.

It is almost as if he wishes to fall asleep here, his glasses already settled on the table, his shoes toed off, slowly crawling more and more of himself off the couch and onto me, knees tucked into his chest, head on my lap. (Making it nearly impossible to continue the reading for History of Magic.)

(*No one reads for that class anyway, Hannibal*. Voice in an ever endearing snark.)

It is not that he constantly insists upon my attention like this, I do not wish to give you the wrong impression. But some evenings, especially as it grows late, especially if it has been a long day, if we have been apart for swathes of time, then he grows...affectionate. And more and more, until I comprehend what he is after. Despite my understanding that I very much do wish to have him in this sense, touch and kiss, *mine*, wholly, I am not always the best at the determination of how to approach such behaviors. It remains a foreign vocabulary to me, on the whole. But he is Will, and now that he too understands, he patiently hints and implies until I respond, and when I do, I must say, I am not a poor study. Though it has only been small interactions largely, hands held in the halls, kisses exchanged in parting, sometimes hungry, sometimes soft, my arm draped lightly along his shoulders, I am learning.

He no longer has to ask for my touch, for instance, in situations as these, when he is easy and pliant, a cuddling mass at my side, all but draped over me. Weeks ago, I might have only continued to write, thinking that alone was enough, but it seems like a foolish sentiment now. Already, I am balancing you on my knee as my hand finds his shoulder, trails fingers down over the curve of it and follows the path along the side of his body, idle motions as he curves into me, pleased. I am always a little astounded by this, by his pleasure at the trailing softness along him, and it warms me wholly to please him. The caught breaths that sometimes flit, the gentle nuzzle in response. From a distance, watching others engage, it seemed nonsensical, even that night—

I try not to think of it, with the others, it was certainly not like this. This warm extension of what exists inside of me. It has become one of my favorite things, touching him carelessly, one of the aspects I treasure most about this strange journey which we have undertaken… Far more complex and nuanced than a strange moonlit night outside of ourselves, mixed up in each other. That was an exaltation, an ancient worship, the hand of fate finally unrolling. A sweetness unlike any other. But though at base the connection is that, its tug undeniable in everything, we are ourselves, in the truth of life as it is, and that is where the relationship exists. In touch, in the graze of my body against his. The curious exploration of each other.

“Will...”

I bend over him, his eyes slitting open to smile up at me, just bare traces of blue from beneath his lashes, a hummed smile, affection languid on his features. I cannot resist leaning over to press my lips to his skin, a kiss on his forehead, to his cheeks, our lips meeting as he cranes slightly up with his chin in request. Meeting and meeting and meeting.

“If you do not leave now, ” He kisses me again, and I lose all my breath, he steals it, steals me. “You are not going to make it to your bed at all.”

The pronouncement is greeted with a huff of air, the outline of a laugh. Sleep roughened voice turning mischievous, and it makes goosebumps shiver down my spine in ways not yet discussed, a brush of flame through my mind.

“Make me.”

His arms lift slow, their path circuitous with exhaustion, fumble into my face, along my chest, a light accidental smack that results in a sheepish laugh. But he is stubborn and I am patient, merely watch him as he struggles, until they loop successfully around my neck, pulling me down into him insistently.

In truth, I have neither the heart, nor want, to make him go, though I am tempted to simply throw him over my shoulder and haul him back to Ravenclaw myself, if only to have him glower and growl in hissing struggles. Sounds, I confess, I enjoy tasting from his mouth. But he is warm along me, already drifting again, smooth faced and peaceful. It occurs to me, as it often does, I would give him anything, if only he asked, to keep him like this.

Smitten, journal, you can say it, I say it too. It is an unalterable truth, I am not ashamed of its existence. I am going to set you down now, and attempt to make myself comfortable as well.

It would appear we will be spending another night on the couch.

H.L.

Chapter 35

Will

Crawford must have had a bout of heartburn or something, because he let us out early today. Jimmy and Alana were in History of Magic still, but the rest of us followed the warm smell of spring out to the lake.

I've spent nights watching the depths, sometimes, through the windows in the Slytherin common room. I wouldn't say my presence is welcomed there, but I think most people are too afraid to say anything upfront. I don't blame them. If Hannibal's lips were to twitch like that at me, I'd probably drop the subject too, no matter how much I didn't like his scrawny Ravenclaw boyfriend.

Oh, that's… I've never written that word before. Well, in reference to Hannibal and myself. It's—

Well, anyways. The lake. Right. It's calming to watch the shadows and light flicker across the portholes, knowing that we are safe, behind walls and enchantments, while all kinds of creatures flit past. It doesn't particularly make me want to swim though, so when Bev kicked off her shoes and slipped down the muddy bank, screaming laughter at the cold, Hannibal and I had only to exchange a look before settling on a jutting rock, plenty of space between the water and us.

Brian was not so smart. He watched her right from the water's edge, arms crossed. Feigning unimpressed as he said,

"Yeah, I don't think so."

I wanted to point out that he was awfully near the gently lapping shore for someone who didn't want to get wet, but I bit back on it, grinning. Between us, Hannibal's hand found mine, our fingers fit together easily and the contact set a pleased fluttering in my stomach.

Bev fell backwards into the dark water with a dramatic splash. When she resurfaced, hair slick, clothes clinging, she spit water, spattering Brian's shirt and drawing an indignant splutter from him, and as I'd predicted, he charged in, splashing and shouting.

There's an easing of breath, a calm, now. I feel like the worst days are behind us, because if Hannibal and I are together again, in all ways, everything is as it should be. The casual touches, mornings filled with his soft chuckle as steam from breakfast fogs my glasses, falling asleep wrapped in hazy, sleepy happiness and each other's arms on one of the couches in the common room, it's almost unbelievable that I went so long without.

I rested my cheek against his shoulder, and he shifted, to better fit us together.

"I do believe I will miss her," he commented lightly. I felt his voice rumble through his chest, I wanted to cup it in my hands, keep it.

I nodded my agreement against his shirt, watching the scuffle below. Brian was getting enthusiastically dunked.

"And Alana," I added softly, "and Jimmy, and Brian."

and...

The pause was full, no need to say it. We did not acknowledge what the warming air and easing coursework also meant for us. Thoughts of trains and platforms and planes were shoved hastily to the back of my mind. Today was enough.

I skimmed my fingertips up his neck, across the pale scar, slipped them through his hair, soft and uncombed, for once, to pull him into a press of lips. His breath left him in a rush, a low, pleased sound in his chest, eyes fluttering closed, and I leaned closer. I wanted to take him back to the castle where we could find a secret place to explore that quiet noise of need more thoroughly.

"Get a room."

Alana was grinning, cheeks pink, eyes wicked. She made her way down the bank, followed by Jimmy, who sighed when he caught sight of a thoroughly soaked Brian still slogging around through the shallows. Hannibal's expression was carefully neutral when I pulled sheepishly back; he didn’t open his eyes until she plopped herself down behind us, at which point he cast her a very unamused side-eye.

"I'm glad you guys figured out all your," she paused, pulling an orange out of her bag, "y'know. Whatever that was. But really,"

She looked up beneath her lashes at Hannibal.

"Shockingly rude."

Jimmy was now standing at the water's edge, bickering loudly with the others about mud and offering several bullet points on kappas.

A sly look crossed Hannibal's face, dark and pleased and dangerous. I thought nonsensically of ice cubes dropped in cocoa, of how they crack.

"I'll keep your wearied tolerance in mind when you and Beverley figure out all your... Whatever it is."

Her nose wrinkled.

"That's—there's no 'whatever' with Bev and I."

Hannibal winked at me over her head.

As if sensing she was being talked about, Bev turned to face us, waved, with a bright smile. I watched Alana carefully for traces of what I'd somehow overlooked in myself, but she only smiled, a small tilt of her head, and then laughed as Brian grabbed Bev around the waist and tossed her slight, struggling form back into the water.

Maybe...

But I won't meddle. I was content with the blue above, the buzz of laughter, and the heavy, lazy feeling that settled in my limbs against the steady rise and fall of Hannibal's breath.

Oh, but he's here now; back to the common room after an expedition for snacks. I think it may be prudent for me to put this book away now.

I think I'll see if I can get him to recreate that noise, without other, interfering presences.

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal | *Epilogue*

“Do you ever wonder about that night?”

I am proud, journal, that my voice did not quaver as I posed the query. Too often it has the tendency to shake, to run, to hide again as the first signs of trouble brew. But there is not trouble here, I reminded myself, inhaling and exhaling the question without allowing myself to trip over the words. There is only me, and Will, the quiet of the morning air around us.

It was early, far too early, but we had spent the entirety of the evening feverishly studying for our last exam, too wired by adrenaline culminated, coffee, and other...doctored aids, to find rest—separate in our beds, or on the couch where we usually drift. And truthfully journal, as the days lessen, it seems like only yesterday there were weeks remaining, and then there was, at least one more full stretch, and then five, and now there are three, it seems a waste to sleep, a waste to go to separate classes, a waste to do anything but bury ourselves in moments together. When I think back on this year, my heart twists mournful in my chest. All the seconds lost, all the moments spent far, all those instants where our fingers might have twined, the easing presence of his company around me, so carelessly destroyed between our clumsy miscommunications. I do not regret learning that I love him, I would not return the trials that brought me to the realization, I only wish, in that way that I am sometimes, when I am nothing but flesh and bone, and foolish human emotion, that there had been another path.

But he is here with me now, was there with me, as the first brushes of sun began lightening the sky, the purple of night clinging as dawn stirs in its bed, spread across the windows behind us, though the torches still flickered their reddish sparks. A surreal knowledge in the air, that the night had passed and we had passed it too, together, strange mournfulness mixed with triumph.

It was there, in that transient space, neither our laughing day, nor our soft nights, that my tongue uncurled to ask.

“Does it bother you?”

We were not touching, he stood before me, wrapped up in my overlarge sweater, the width of it too big, drooping endearingly along his shoulders, the grey and green of it unusual surrounding him, making his eyes stand out unnaturally large, less open blue, and more still of lake, as he contemplated my words. But he was not far, we were not far. Touching, not touching, it doesn’t matter anymore, he is always close. I feel his brush from every distance, the lurking constancy of him in my head that perhaps he does not even realize is there, that I do not push out.

I ask him now, because as I said, we are parting, we are parting and if I am honest, as I have not been with him in so many words, as I have not even been with myself, except in this moment of suspension, where I raise old wounds, I am terrified. Terrified that the ease will fade away without proximity, that in my absence, in our absence, he will forget again, or he will realize that he was

mistaken. That he will decide, once more, I am not what he wants. And so I wish to leave no cracks in our foundations, will meet this head on, not allow it to burrow deeper.

His face curved up in a frown, considering.

“Does it bother you?” The question redirected, pointed its uneasy gaze back at me. His eyes seemed to grow with the brightening of the air, too lovely, too painful to look at and consider not seeing again for months.

Does it.

I know that it does.

“You don’t have to—” he started, but I did not let him finish the thought, attempted nonchalance that the early hour did not allow me to quite carry off.

“Yes.” I tried to sound neutral, to sound as though it did not bother me that it bothered me, but that was a few too many levels of masking, and Will would know already, of course he would. I tried to let honesty cover my tongue instead; *no hiding*, Bev would scold, with a point of finger. So easy it is to summon truth, when I’m telling him that I adore him, or laughing at his melted potion. Harder, with this, emotions on the scale of which I still am not so used to carrying.

“I should not have…”

I do not necessarily regret the...the action of kissing, or exactly the alcohol consumed, it only frustrates me that I—

“...lost control.”

“You were upset, Hannibal, you—”

He tried, and I love him for that, but words I did not even realize I had intended to say sprung bitter from my throat.

“I was entirely out of my head.”

How many had I kissed? One, two, three, that I can recall, but I know from whispers it was more than that, far more, the blurry outlines of faces, of drink, and sensations that blended into one long stretch of hazy memory out of focus behind my skull. Marks on me in the morning that I could not remove, that I had no memory of condoning. That branded me with their reds and their blues, and I could not say if I had even wished for them or not. I assume that I had, but the holes in my memory...I value my control, the loss of it sickens me, leaves resonating disgust in my system. If I were to kiss them, let them kiss me, I would wish to be a thinking party to the experience, not a sensationalist zombie, pushed along by blinding waves—little more than a body seeking pleasure.

I had meant to be confronting Will about his unhappiness regarding the evening, but it would seem I had plenty of my own. Pushed down, locked, then distracted away from. But I had opened the chest and it rose in me.

“I apologize,” But this time it was me that was cut off, arms around me, Will around me, head buried in my chest, fierce, determined. The way he was holding me, I do not think I can properly explain it, except to say that he was fierce, as though the unhappiness was something he could take

from me as I take his glasses from him, set them aside on the table and let his eyes slide shut, taken care of. In that embrace, I was safe. I understood safety in my aunt, I understood it in locks, in empty spaces and solitude. But in this moment, I was open, and he was holding the insecurity, taking it into his fingers so I would not have to hold it myself.

“It doesn’t bother me.” The words are clear, too loud, against my sleep shirt. “That you kissed them, that they kissed you, touched you, all of that.” His arms squeeze, pull tighter, the moment makes me feel strangely fragile, uncomfortable in ways, but welcome, in others. I have only ever felt like this in the conflagrations, in the dramatic sweeps of emotion, not for the simplicity of having drunk too much and forgotten myself. (Though I know, it was not nearly...simple.) But it is a strange sensation to experience in casual strides. When it does not feel as though my entire world is crumbling at the seams, merely that I have an unhappiness, a flaw, a displeasure, and that is enough to require being cared for. He cares for me. I felt foolishly like a child mouthing the words silently into the air, learning still even after weeks together, the nuances of what exactly that means. Hugs in the early morning, admissions of imperfection, strange, strange, normalcies.

“But I should have, Hannibal, I— I’m so sorry.”

He dragged himself back away from me to look at me, a mirror to the guilt I felt cracked open in his eyes.

“I should have done better.”

The same words that were echoing through my mind. I held him back and tried to do for him the same thing. Pick up the pain, take it away. He laughed as I squeezed suddenly, squeezing me back, even harder, squeezing to chase the guilt away, pain, the displeasure, all of it, together. And the moment devolved into an escalation of arms.

He’d like me to note that he won, so I will. ~~And do so without also noting that I purposefully surrendered.~~

Two more days, now that the sun has risen on the third.

I truly do not know how I will go without this.

H.L.

Chapter End Notes

And we've reached the end of another year. Thanks so much to everyone who left comments; we love this fic, and them, and you've all been so wonderful, even as we went through this very dark part of their story.

Not to fear though—this is the end of this particular chapter for them, but their story is far from over. We'll kick off year five on Saturday (10/17) by posting the first twelve entries throughout the day (Spoiler: these ones are letters, so I think it's wise to read them in close succession). Until then, you can put your eyes on this fanart or browse the AMOI blog. Or, just come say hi to Ro and I on tumblr if you want: @the-winnowing-wind and @crazyphases respectively. Otherwise...

See you on the train.
—Q

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!